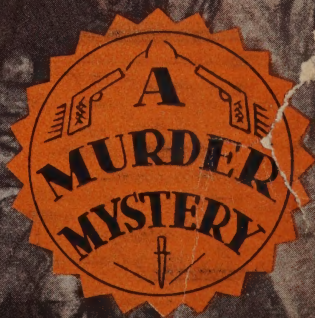


Samuel Merwin

**LADY
CAN
DO**



LADY CAN DO

By SAMUEL MERWIN

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LADY CAN DO

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BY

SAMUEL MERWIN

*Author of 'Silk,' 'Anabel at Sea,'
'The Moment of Beauty,' etc.*



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TO
LENNY

LADY CAN DO

LADY CAN DO

I

I

ELSIE's first surprise was the chauffeur. He proved to be a Chinaman.

The limousine was one of those incredibly costly and luxurious imported vehicles. She had never seen or felt such upholstery. The wide seat fairly enveloped her. The interior had fascinating little gadgets; cut-glass domes for the lights, and more cut-glass holding fresh flowers . . . orchids, actually. A card-case and ash-trays and a mirror and what not. She nearly laughed out loud as she settled back. The Chinaman was so gravely polite. And she just Elsie Penn, with the rather battered suitcase and typewriter that she'd lugged through the vast areas of the Grand Central Station. It was fascinating, being met with all this grandeur. And it was funny.

Rolling smoothly out of the village into a pleasant, dusky countryside, she fell to putting together in her mind what Miss Virtue had said. Miss Virtue conducted the college agency, and had seemed to interest herself in

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Elsie. 'You will find the Cuppys really delightful people, Miss Penn. In spite of their vast wealth. Mr. Cuppy, you understand, is a great Orientalist. N. Jonas Cuppy, you know. He inherited enormous oil fields in California. I am told that his collection, outside of the Freer Gallery and the Metropolitan and South Kensington Museums, is probably the finest in the world. And Mrs. Cuppy is said to be a fascinating personality. They do not go about much in society. Mrs. Cuppy appears to prefer to gather interesting people about her. Artists and such. She really maintains a salon. She is said to resemble Madame Récamier. . . . Your work, Miss Penn, will be, I believe, to serve as a companion and social secretary to Mrs. Cuppy, and also to take care of her husband's correspondence. You may find it necessary to use a little tact and skill in dealing with Mr. Cuppy. His wealth, I have gathered, leads him into a certain measure of self-indulgence . . . these things are rather inevitable, I fear . . . but I am assured that he is kindly, that he is really generous in the extreme. When Miss Hinson was there she — er ——'

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‘Why did Miss Hinson leave?’

‘Oh, she married. In any event, Miss Penn, I feel certain that you will find little difficulty in meeting the situation. A girl of your intelligence and training. And your native dignity. You are the mental type, distinctly.’ (Elsie had on, at the time, the sort of straight little frock you wore to business.) ‘I wouldn’t think of recommending an inexperienced little thing of the sensory type, for this position. Living right there in the house and all. . . . You will be treated virtually as one of the family.’ Elsie giggled. Then caught herself. That Chinaman couldn’t hear through the front glass, but he could see. He had one of those tittuppy little mirrors over the windshield.

They turned in through a Chinesy arch of carved wood, red and blue and green, into a curving driveway. A long driveway. Stopped under a *porte cochère*. It was rather disappointing to find that the house wasn’t Chinese in architecture. It was just a Long Island mansion. But before the dim doorway swallowed her, her quick eyes glimpsed through the twilight a Japanese rock garden with stone lantern posts and arching wooden

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bridges. Within a middle-aged woman met her, saying — ‘I am Miss Briggs, the house-keeper’ — and led her off up a broad flight of stairs. But those eyes of hers, windows of a sensitive imagination, caught vivid confused impressions . . . cabinets set in the walls, with glass shelves and cunningly hidden lights, full of exquisite carved objects in ivory and crystal and jade — junks and animals and vases and quaint little people. A stately Chinese servant in a long blue gabardine but with a cropped head (‘He ought to have a pigtail,’ thought Elsie) moved through the hall with a tray of cocktails. She heard voices far away, chatting and laughing.

Miss Briggs conducted her to a pleasant room on the third floor. Another Oriental, also in a blue gabardine, brought in her suitcase and typewriter. Elsie, her eyes sparkling with a curious sense of excitement in the air, looked about, exclaiming softly — ‘How awfully nice!’

‘Mrs. Cuppy is having a house party,’ said Miss Briggs. ‘Here is the costume she wishes you to wear.’

Elsie stifled a girlish squeal. For, laid out

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on the bed, were Chinese garments in green satin, with embroidered patterns in artfully contrasted colors and swirls of gold thread and pictorial borders on the wide sleeves depicting houses and gardens and people. It simply couldn't be real. 'I will help you dress and make up,' remarked Miss Briggs dispassionately. And swiftly, deftly did so. Elsie found herself in long coat and flapping trousers and embroidered slippers and green gilt cap, with a roguish red-and-white face smiling at her out of the mirror. Her honest, pleasant mouth was now a vermilion bud. She felt like pirouetting.

'You had better go right down, I think,' said Miss Briggs, and led her to a spacious room on the ground floor that was like an apartment in a museum . . . softly lighted, with carved cabinets made of some dark wood and full of priceless objects. In a corner, between two stands of Japanese armor, and partly hidden by a huge bulging blue-and-white vase that was at least six feet high, she saw a table in that same dark wood and two Chinese chairs with bent arms.

'This will be your desk,' said Miss Briggs, and left her.

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A rather high-pitched, rippling voice called, 'Has she come, Miss Briggs?' Then — 'Oh, here you are, my dear! I am Mrs. Cuppy.'

A small person, quite as small as Elsie herself; slightly plump, but pretty. The eyes were large and round, pale blue in color, and tending to bulge. She seemed young. Or youngish. You couldn't tell. Forty, perhaps; or less. Anywhere in the thirties. That rippling voice was the sort that might easily coo and even gush. She, too, was in embroidered coat and trousers. A great deal of color and design on a base of blue satin that matched her eyes. Tiny feet and hands. Considerable grace of movement. A light, quick person. Probably, back of the cooing voice, a determined person. All this Elsie took in, and then focussed her attention on the lady's cap. It was an amazing structure of openwork silver-gilt, completely covering the head, and so built up with flowers and butterflies and interwoven symbolic objects that it looked almost like a floral mound. Innumerable pearls were strewn about in the complicated design, the largest and most oddly shaped that Elsie had ever seen; while from each side hung

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five loops of matched round pearls, clear to the shoulders.

‘You are looking at my cap, my dear. Isn’t it wonderful? My husband bought it for me only the other day.’ She turned to a mirror that was set in a carved frame of red lacquer. ‘It belonged to the old Empress Dowager. Looted from the Summer Palace in 1900, during the Boxer trouble.’ Elsie didn’t know what the Boxer trouble was, so she kept discreetly silent. The cooing voice rippled on — ‘All these beautiful Chinese things are brought to my husband eventually. The Chinese merchants positively live off him. What a history this old cap could relate! Do you know, my dear, it didn’t come to us through the usual channels. Two strange Chinamen drove out here one evening in a flivver. Imagine! They had the cap wrapped up in a newspaper. And my husband tells me he bought it for a song. He is still chuckling over it. Some strange, dark story there. Most fascinating! Don’t you love the romance that clusters about these beautiful old things?’ She smiled complacently into the mirror, and ran her little fingers in among the looping strings of pearls. ‘It would bring

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not far from a quarter of a million at auction. And I'm sure my husband didn't pay twenty-five thousand. Isn't it amazing! . . . Now, my dear, stand out here in the light and let me look you over. . . . Why, you're charming! A jade image come to life!' She clapped her hands. 'You're perfectly charming! You must come and meet my guests. Such fascinating people! I want you to feel quite at home, quite as if you were one of us. We are very democratic, you know. . . . Ah, here is my husband!'

Elsie found herself before a large, stout mandarin. She saw a graying mustache, and puffy, tired eyes. Rather a stupid face, she thought. Merely having money didn't make people interesting, of course. He had been drinking. She could smell it.

'Our new secretary, Jonas. Miss . . . Miss Penny.'

'Miss Penn,' said Elsie, with an uncomfortable sensation of being afloat on a strange and very wide sea.

Mr. Cuppy's big, soft hand closed about hers, and held it a little longer than necessary. His wife caught his arm, with a 'Come, dear. We must go back to the other room. I

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want to show Miss Penn the adorable portrait Mr. Dane has made of me.'

She moved briskly, lightly away. Elsie looked down at herself. The green costume was exquisite. The padded slippers peeped out from the bottoms of her satin trousers. Queer, all this. She'd have to feel her way. Perhaps she wouldn't stay. It certainly wasn't what you'd term a businesslike atmosphere. Not easy to be properly impersonal here.

That blue gabardine appeared with the tray. She saw Mr. Cuppy pause and take a glass. He poured it down his capacious throat at a gulp, and then rolled his tongue back and smacked his lips. With a 'Thank you, Sin,' to the tall figure in the blue gabardine. She didn't drink, herself. And she wouldn't. She'd have to keep her head. As it was, she felt drunk with beauty. She lingered to look at the single lantern on the desk. It was a six-sided vase of eggshell porcelain, brilliantly decorated in floral designs with greens predominating. The electric light within shone softly through.

She felt an arm about her shoulders and started: then stood as if frozen. Mr. Cuppy's

voice, at her ear, murmured — ‘Nice bit of porcelain, that lantern. K’ang Hsi period. Late seventeenth century. I paid six thousand for it.’ The arm gave her shoulders a squeeze. They were hidden from the door by that huge vase. ‘This is what Miss Virtue meant,’ thought Elsie, shivering slightly, and moving away. ‘I’ll certainly have to watch my step. Mrs. Cuppy has had her troubles with this man. He’s just a boob.’

‘Come along, you two!’ called that lady, from the door.

Elsie hurried to join her. Funny way for her to put it . . . ‘you two.’ A distinct touch of self-consciousness in her tone. Elsie hoped her high color wouldn’t show through the paint. She’d probably better not stay. Too bad. It had sounded like an unusually promising job.

N. Jonas Cuppy. A name to which the newspapers always paid the profoundest deference. Money did that. She wondered what the ‘N’ stood for. Something comic, surely, or he’d never lean so pompously on the ‘Jonas.’ Nehemiah, perhaps.

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2

The spacious living-room glittered with color and (to Elsie's aloof ears) cackled with sound. Perhaps a dozen folk, all in Chinese costume. The cocktails had loosened their tongues. She found herself being casually introduced, and as casually, if firmly, placed . . . 'My new secretary, Miss Penn. Isn't she a dear!' . . . It was no use trying to keep the individuals straight — these painted, exquisite ladies, and the mandarins.

'You've heard of Emily Eames, my dear.' Heard of Emily Eames? My word! There was no more famous young actress in the English-speaking world. A languidly smiling, slender young creature who gave her a non-committal hand. . . . 'This is Mr. Ettlethwaite, the novelist. You've read "Burnt Fingers." Isn't it the most adorable book! . . . Mr. Stromberg, Miss Penn. My new secretary. But I tell her she is to feel herself quite one of us. Mr. Stromberg does the most delightfully adventurous things, my dear. Climbed the second highest mountain in the Himalayas. He's leaving soon for darkest Tibet. The Stromberg-Cuppy Ethnographical Expedition . . . Isn't it fascinating to have

all these wonderful people about one! Just a little group of friends! . . . Oh, yes, you must know Mr. Delos. The music critic, you know. Mr. Delos, Miss Penn. . . . *And* Mr. Dane. John Dane, you know. Come right over here and see his portrait of me. You never in your life saw anything so fascinating. But oh, so flattering!’

Elsie found herself looking up into a pair of keen, inscrutable gray eyes. A tall young man, John Dane, with the faintest hint of an amused smile playing over a lean, handsome face. Then the three of them stood before the picture; a pastel drawing of Mrs. Cuppy in her Chinese dress set in a lacquered frame. It was charmingly done. And it did flatter the lady. What fascinated Elsie was not so much the portrait as the expression on John Dane’s face. What could he be thinking? Probably you’d never know. Compared with the rest he seemed sober. That capacious tray appeared just then at his elbow. He said quietly (she liked his voice: it was rather deep, and quietly controlled), ‘No more, Sin, thanks. Reached my limit.’

‘You’ll have a cocktail, Miss Penn?’ Mrs. Cuppy’s purring voice.

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‘No, thank you. I never drink.’

‘Never drink? How quaint! But perhaps it’s just as well . . . Wait, Sin! I’ll have another.’

Elsie, a few moments later, found herself on a sofa with Mr. Delos. He had reached the argumentative stage and seized on her for an audience. Music, he said, was in imminent danger of passing, along with painting, into sheer degeneracy. Eastern Europe was the seat of the trouble. Those Eastern Europeans. They burrowed. Sapped and mined. Attacked our culture. Fought insistently, clamorously, to destroy a standard of art that they could not understand. . . . Elsie thought, ‘It’s like a lecture.’ . . . Every few moments, as he talked, he was interrupted by an extraordinary human gargoyle in a yellow robe who strode about the room with a violin, playing themes from orchestral compositions. This person would rush upon them, wind up a theme with a bold flourish of his bow, fix madly glittering eyes on the impressive Mr. Delos, and cry nasally, ‘What’s that? What’s that, eh? What’s that one?’ Delos, turning each time with a mounting impatience, would reply, ‘That . . .

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er . . . why, that's César Franck.' Or — 'Don't be absurd! It's . . . er . . . third movement of Beethoven's Fourth Symphony.' Or — 'Boris Godunoff, of course. From the coronation scene.'

A little later, just as dinner had been announced, Elsie, escaped at last from the harassed lecturer, saw John Dane catch the yellow-clad gargoyle's arm, and ask, with a note of dry humor in his voice, 'What on earth have you been doing to that poor critic?'

The gargoyle chuckled. His eyes did look mad. The nasal voice cackled, 'He got two right. Two!'

And John Dane laughed, right out.

He walked down the hall with Elsie. She asked, in a low voice, who the gargoyle might be . . . 'that funny little man with the bald head and the queer eyes.'

'Oh, the perfect nut? He's either a great composer or a lunatic. God alone knows which. He's been fifteen years on a symphony. Tells everybody — tells the world — that he's going to revolutionize music. Utterly. But he never seems to get anything done. The Cuppys staked him for years, but got sick of it and cut him off. He simply

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lived off 'em. He'll tell you. Tells everybody. Hasn't the slightest self-respect that I can see. I didn't think he'd ever come here again. He didn't for a year or so. But here he is! He may really be a genius. *I* don't know. He's very comic on the subject of critics. Loathes them. Thinks they should all be killed.'

At dinner claret was served with the fish, Burgundy with the game, sauterne and champagne after that, cognac with the coffee. It was a curious experience to sit there, icily sober, and note the effects of this flow of liquor. She'd never seen anything like it. The Chinese serving men moved gravely about, pouring, pouring, pouring. Elsie wondered what they could be thinking. Descendants of the oldest civilization in the world, catering to the idle pleasures of the newest. The one they called Sin particularly interested her. The tall one. Evidently the butler. She noted that John Dane merely sipped. Thank God, there'd be one reasonably sober person to talk with later in the evening. Mr. Cuppy, on the other hand, drank and drank and drank. Everything that was put before him. And held it amaz-

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ingly. His eyes seemed to grow gradually deader and more puffy. The lines in his face appeared to deepen. His double chins bulged out over his collar. And his skin took on the yellowish tinge of parchment. Mrs. Cuppy talked a little thickly, but lost none of her vivacity. The actress, Miss Eames, leaned on Mr. Ettlethwaite, her arm about his shoulders. A man across the table, whom Elsie hadn't met, called, 'Don't let her vamp you, Etty!'

'Vamp me? She can go as far as she likes. I'll tell the cock-eyed world this is my idea of Heaven.'

Promptly, at this, Miss Eames drew his head over, kissed him, and murmured, 'Isn't he sweet!'

When they rose from the table. Elsie considered the possibility of escaping. She could slip out. Very likely they wouldn't know. Perhaps just go up to her room. But she knew, from a nervous tightness that had seized on her, that it wouldn't be easy to get to sleep. She felt oddly unhappy. A sensation not unlike a poignant homesickness. If she went to bed she'd just lie there and cry. She thought of the rock garden she'd glimpsed

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through the *porte cochère*. A dim, cool spot. She decided to flee out there. On the way, she saw those Chinamen carrying the now recumbent Mr. Cuppy into a den behind the Chinese room. They were perfectly matter of fact about it. She paused by the door, an unsteady hand pressed to her quick-beating heart, and watched while they laid the lumpish thing on a sofa. Wondered again what their thoughts might be. You couldn't tell. Their faces told nothing. . . . Then she fled.

The rock garden did offer sanctuary. She mounted one of the high-arching bridges. It pleased her, that bridge. She didn't know why. Excitedly, at the point of giggling (that would be sheer nerves), she went back over it. Six or eight times she crossed it. The last time she leaned on the wooden parapet and looked down at the darkly dimpling water. She saw a goldfish, faintly. Watched it move slowly against the current. Then, with a catch of the breath, she wandered along and sat on a stone bench, looking up through the foliage at the sky.

She heard a step. A tall mandarin came over the bridge. John Dane.

'Room for another stray?' he asked.

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She moved over and he sat beside her. He didn't appear to think conversation necessary. She felt grateful for that. You could see that he was an understanding person. And he wasn't drunk. He pushed back the black cap he wore, drew a handkerchief from his wide sleeve, and mopped his forehead; then stared moodily at the twinkling light in a stone lantern across the path.

'It's beautiful here,' said she.

Before replying he lifted his head and sniffed the night air. 'If only it didn't smell of oil,' he said.

She laughed softly. 'Aren't you a little naughty?'

'Always was. Can't help it. You see, I've been living here a week. While I was making that drawing.'

'The Cuppys are friends of yours?'

He considered that. 'I never heard that they had any friends.'

That surprised her. 'But all these people . . .'

'Oh, Hazel collects 'em. People. That's her game. Always getting new lots. Throwing personalities at each other, real ones and fakes. People live off her, of course. Take

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Stromberg. 'There's an adventurer for you. . . . No, I didn't come here out of friendship. I came for exactly five hundred dollars.'

'Oh . . . you . . .'

'The price of my services. One pastel portrait, five hundred. I'm leaving to-morrow. Take my check and go on my way.'

That was, vaguely, a disappointment. With this man gone, there wouldn't be . . . well, anybody.

She felt his quizzical eyes on her. 'How about yourself? Think you can stick it?'

'Well . . . I . . . ' Really, she must be careful. Secretaries mustn't talk. But one rather pointed question escaped her. 'Mr. Cuppy . . . is he . . .'

'Yes?'

'Surely he isn't always . . . well, like this?'

'Oh, more or less. Always pickled, if that's what you mean. Oh, he doesn't always pass out.'

'But . . . I'm afraid I'm a bit bewildered . . . I supposed he was rather a great man.'

Dane screwed up his face comically. 'Jonas Cuppy? A great man! My eye!'

'Well . . . perhaps I mean a great' — what was the word — 'Orientalist.'

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'He isn't anything. Not anything at all. That's Hazel again. She's full of energy, you know. I suppose, when she found she'd married him, she had to do something to put him across. Organize him. She would.'

'Well!' Elsie sat still a moment. 'Frankly, I don't know whether I can stick it or not.'

'I can't help hoping you won't. It isn't so good. If you don't mind my saying it, my guess is that you aren't the type at all.'

'Still,' said she honestly, 'it is a job.'

'Oh, yes. A job for a hard-boiled little devil who'd play up to them. You and I don't know each other, of course. But if my offhand judgment is any good at all, I'd put you down as anything but hard-boiled. I'd place you as a sensitive, essentially decent sort of person.'

'Well . . .'

'And if so, I'm afraid you're in wrong here.'

'They pay well.'

'Oh, yes. I know.'

'And after all, a girl who works for a living has to meet life. It can't all be pleasant.'

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'No, it can't.' He rested his elbows on his knees; leaning moodily forward, gazing again at that stone lantern.

'Fortunately I'm the mental type.'

He sat up. 'Mental type? My eye!'

'Well . . . really! . . .'

'You're nothing of the sort.'

'How can you. . . '

'Oh, listen now! You're probably considerable of a dear. Oh, I saw the excitement in your eyes when Hazel brought you into the room. And while Emily Eames was high-hatting you. Mental, nothing! You're young and impressionable. I'd bet five dollars you're full of romantic thoughts. My God, you're positively naïve!'

'Of course, if you . . .'

'Oh, come! Here we are, in these absurd costumes . . . I can't speak for myself, but you're enchanting in yours . . . sitting out in an exquisite Japanese garden. It's a fake, but it is lovely to the eye and to the senses. And you sitting here and trying to tell me you're the mental type. It's simply too good! Why, bless your heart, don't you see that that sort of girl would never be out here at all? She'd have gone straight up to her room

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and shut herself away from that loony bunch in there.'

'Well . . .'

'I'm romantic, and willing to admit it. Just a fool artist. Never will have any money. Never will get anywhere. When they all get educated to pastel portraits I'll be painting water-color landscapes that nobody wants. I'll be perverse about it, too. . . . Why, hasn't it occurred to you that it's all I can do to keep my hands off you? Surely you realize that to sit out here, the occasion being what it is, and not make love, is pure waste. Just a delightful opportunity thrown away. No, you're not safe anywhere here. Take my advice and pull out. You're not safe even with me. If I weren't in such a ticklish situation here . . . the damndest mess, just to-night . . .'

Elsie remarked primly, 'I don't do those things.'

He stared at her. Then, deliberately, gently in a way, gathered her into his arms.

She ought to stop him. Struggle. Fight him off. She knew he wouldn't use force. But she didn't fight him. Oh, she murmured some feeble protests . . . heard herself saying, 'Oh, please!' . . . but what good was that?

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She pushed him away. 'Somebody's coming!' Her nerves were on edge. Very close to outright hysteria. The fact that he stirred her so, that she liked him, was no more than a part of that inner confusion.

A dainty Chinese figure was approaching. Mrs. Cuppy! She mounted the bridge. Swaying a little as she walked, and steadying herself by groping for the rail. Over she came. Laughing inanely. 'Oho! Here you are! So you thought you could hide from me, John Dane! You come right along with me! Right straight back into the house. We're not going to have any of this sort of thing!' There was laughter all through this, but it wasn't pleasant laughter.

Dane, with a queer look on his face, rose without a word and moved toward the bridge.

Mrs. Cuppy leaned over Elsie. Or tried to. She'd have fallen if the girl hadn't steadied her. Smiling, in a fuddled way, and lowering her voice, she said, 'You're a very pretty little girl. Very pretty and very sly. But take my advice, my dear, and look round a little more carefully before you try steal a man. Might be the wrong one. Might be somebody else's man. Just a frien'ly

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warning, my dear. Just a frien'ly warning.'

Dane was lighting a cigarette. The woman joined him, caught his arm, and led him back over the bridge. Elsie dropped her head on her arm and cried. It was good to cry.

3

A car drove in under the *porte cochère*. It looked like a station taxi. A man got out, and the car went away. Elsie moved over to the stone lantern for a glance at her wrist watch. It was a little after eleven. She'd been alone out here more than an hour. Better go to bed. She could slip quietly upstairs. Probably she'd get very little sleep, but no matter. In the morning she'd catch a train back to town. If Mrs. Cuppy insisted on two weeks' notice, she'd simply waive the question of pay. Waive it anyway. She didn't want their money. For that matter, they'd all be sleeping late. She'd just go. Who could stop her?

She walked slowly to the steps and let herself in. Far away (it seemed) in that big living room, they were pounding the piano

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and screaming a popular song out of tune. One of the men kept roaring out a misplaced top note.

Miss Briggs appeared. 'Oh, Miss Penn,' she said, 'I've been looking for you. It's a matter I imagine you'd better take hold of. Mr. Wong is here.'

Elsie could meet this with nothing more than an inquiring look.

'Wong Long Ti,' Miss Briggs added. Then — 'I supposed you'd know.'

'I never heard of him.'

'Well, he's the biggest Chinese merchant in New York. Really quite a friend of Mr. Cuppy's. He often visits here. We'll have to put him up. The last train from town has gone. I'll confess I don't know where. The bedrooms are all occupied. The only thing I can think of is to put him in Mr. Cuppy's room. You see, he's . . .'

Elsie indicated the door to the den. 'Still in there?'

'Oh, yes. He won't know. We could just leave him. We'd have to really. The boys could never carry him upstairs. He's pretty heavy. I suppose we could explain to Mrs. Cuppy.'

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'Where is this Mr. Wong?' asked Elsie. She'd take hold, as best she could.

'In the dining-room. I put him in there.'

'All right. Thank you. I'll talk with him.'

He stood by a window. An elderly Chinese gentleman. It was amusing, in a way, to note his business suit and the derby hat he held. In her bizarre costume and with all this paint on her face, she felt incongruous. She wondered, in a flutter, if John Dane, in that queer, disturbing moment, had smeared her face; and stole a hasty glance at a mirror. He hadn't.

'How do you do?' Thus the visitor, courteously. He took her costume quite for granted. Doubtless he knew Hazel Cuppy's ways.

'I am Miss Penn, Mrs. Cuppy's secretary. Is there something I can do for you, Mr. Wong? Won't you sit down?'

He seemed unable to do that. She saw now that the kindly face looked old and worn, and that there was confusion in the slanting eyes. His fingers, too, fumbled about the brim of his hat.

'Thank you,' he said. 'I am in great trouble. I must, if I can do, see Mr. Cuppy.' His English, if quaint, was clear enough.

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'I am sorry. Mr. Cuppy is not . . . not well . . . and has retired.'

'It is very important.'

'I am sorry. He couldn't possibly see you to-night.'

The limp fingers fumbled along the brim of the derby hat . . . turning it, turning it. The old face worked. He sank into one of the chairs by the table. 'I am not very well,' he murmured, apologetically. 'It is, I think, my life.'

'Oh!' was all Elsie could say to that. He was smiling now, in a pathetic, tremulous way. The only course she could pursue, obviously, was to persuade him to speak out. She couldn't deal in mysteries. So, after some meditation, she came out with it. 'If you care to explain it to me, Mr. Wong, I will be glad to do whatever is in my power. I am afraid there is no one else you can talk with to-night. Really no one.'

He sighed. Then smiled again. It tugged at her heart, that smile. He was a gentleman. 'Very well,' he said. 'Maybe you know if Mr. Cuppy has got a cap of the Empress Dowager. A very wonderful pearl cap.'

Elsie hesitated. The man was, after all, a

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dealer. And it wasn't her business to give information. 'It is something, this pearl cap, of interest to you, Mr. Wong?'

'Too much,' said he; and sighed again. 'I will tell you this, I must buy that cap. I will pay much. All I have in the world, if necessary. I am not a poor man. I must have the cap to-night. And perhaps, then, Mr. Cuppy, as a friend, an old, old friend, would send me back to New York in one of his cars. I must do this. If you will tell Mr. Cuppy it is not a question of price. He will say the price. I will pay. I must buy the cap.' He seemed to choke slightly. And then he said in pidgin English, as if, in this moment of emotional stress, his labored, quaint English failed him, 'Lady can do? Maybe?'

Elsie knit her brows. 'Am I to understand, Mr. Wong, that this is a matter of life or death to you?'

'It is, I know, my life.'

No one could look into that simple, kindly old face and doubt the man's sincerity. He was, unquestionably, at some desperate pass. She might speak to Mrs. Cuppy. It wouldn't be pleasant. She shivered unhappily at the thought of entering that living room.

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Dreaded what she might see there. This was tackling the new job with a vengeance. On this first bewildering evening. Still, it was the job. That was a steadying thought. It was something to do.

‘If you will wait here, Mr. Wong,’ she said, ‘I will see what I can do for you.’

She hesitated in the wide doorway. They were making a good deal of noise. There was liquor all about, on tables and on the piano, glasses and bottles and siphons. Still that flow of liquor. At the piano, the critic and the gargoye in the yellow robe were hammering out jazz, four-handed, and singing. The irrepressible top note belonged, it appeared, to Mr. Delos. Miss Eames and that author, Mr. Ettlethwaite, were dancing, in a close embrace. From all sides voices rose discordantly. Some of the men, in a corner, appeared to be arguing hotly about religion. Elsie’s unquiet eyes sought Mrs. Cuppy. There she was, on a sofa, but not with John Dane. It was Stromberg, the explorer, who talked with her, holding one of her hands and patting it as if for emphasis. A thin man with keen, handsome features and bright eyes that were set too close together. The Manchu cap

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on Mrs. Cuppy's pretty head had slipped to one side, giving her a roguish air. Her free hand caressed those amazing strings of pearls. . . . John Dane sat sprawled in an easy chair, soberly looking on. He gave her one of his quick, quizzical smiles, which she didn't return. During her hour of solitude in the rock garden she had decided to put him straight out of her mind. It was the only clean way to handle that sort of episode.

As Elsie crossed the room Mrs. Cuppy and Stromberg rose as if to join the dancers. The woman steadied herself, standing there, by clinging to the odd-looking European. She looked moody; really rather cross, Elsie thought. The cap had slipped further awry, so that the strings of pearls fell across her face. She brushed them aside; then carelessly tossed the cap on the sofa.

Elsie picked it up, as she said guardedly, 'Mrs. Cuppy, may I have just a word with you?'

'Oh, run along.' It was unpleasantly fascinating to watch that pretty mouth shaping itself deliberately and with difficulty about the words. 'I wanna dance. Don' bother me.' Then to the grinning Stromberg,

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'Don' let this li'l devil vamp you, Gustaf. She's the sly one.'

'But Mrs. Cuppy . . . please! . . . just a moment . . .'

'Oh, don' bother me! Run along!' And as she whirled unsteadily off she called back, 'Throw tha' cap away. Keep it yourself. I don' care. It gets in my eyes.' And then clung to her partner.

Elsie stood holding the cap. She hadn't an idea what to do. She saw one of the other men hit Stromberg jovially on the back and take the woman away from him.

The only place she could think of to put the cap was in the Chinese room. She walked quickly out into the hall. Then she heard a quick step, and Stromberg's voice fell on her ears. 'What it is that you do with the cap?'

She turned. The expression about his narrow eyes, and his grin, disturbed her. He had a tall glass in his hand. She said, rather crisply, 'I am putting it away'; and hurried into that dim, beautiful room.

Hearing steps behind her, and supposing it still to be the European, she turned with an exclamation of impatience. She must watch her nerves.

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But this time it proved to be John Dane.

'What are you going to do with that thing?' he remarked. 'It really ought to go into a safe, but I don't know where Cuppy's safe is, or how to get into it. It is priceless, you know.'

'Of course,' said she, remembering her decision to be short with him.

'I'll tell you . . . there's a sort of secret drawer in the table over here. Cuppy showed it to me. Let me see.' He led the way around that huge vase and felt along the under edge of the table-top. 'Here it is,' he said, at last, and drew out a shallow tray.

Elsie, hearing a muffled sound, turned with a start.

'What is it?' asked Dane.

She lowered her voice. 'Well . . . I think somebody else is in the room.'

He stepped around the vase. 'No,' he said, 'nobody.'

She laid the cap flat in the drawer and closed it.

'Will you sit in here a little while?' he asked. 'I'd like to chin a little more.'

'No. If you'll excuse me. I'm pretty tired. I'm going right upstairs.'

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‘Well . . . I *would* like to say that I’ve felt disturbed. I’m afraid I rather took advantage . . .’

‘Please!’ She simply couldn’t say more. Stromberg was sitting on a carved chest in the hall. He grinned and waved at her. She ran upstairs. Ran with a curious sensation of panic. She’d slip out early in the morning. Carry off her suitcase and typewriter on foot, if necessary. Though doubtless she could call a taxi. There was a telephone in the side hall that led to the *porte cochère*.

It wasn’t until she reached the second floor that she thought of the distressed Mr. Wong. She stood, then, for a long moment, thinking out what she might do. Certainly she couldn’t let him have the cap. It didn’t belong to her. But she must do something. She couldn’t make herself go down those front stairs again; not into that part of the house. So she looked about until she found the servants’ stairway and descended.

Mr. Wong was standing by that window in the dining-room. A patient little old man from a faraway land. She wondered what he could have meant in saying that his life was at stake.

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'I'm sorry,' she said. 'Nothing can be done to-night. But you will stay here. And perhaps to-morrow . . . I will send Miss Briggs . . .'

She hurried out and looked up the house-keeper.

'I'll take him up,' said that person, with a sigh of utter weariness. 'I put out the light in the den. Mr. C.'s snoring in there. I opened the windows a little, and shut him in. It's all I can do.'

She had been only a moment in her room when she heard a tap at the door. Opening, she found the Chinese butler standing there . . . tall, grave, respectful. He bowed.

'Maybe I can speak to Miss,' he said.

'Certainly. What is it?'

'I dunno jus' what I do. I worry about Mister Cuppy.'

'Oh, I imagine he will be all right. Let me see — your name is Sin, isn't it?'

'Yes, Miss. I am Sin. You think maybe I better try wake Mr. Cuppy up? Take him upstairs?'

'Why . . . oh, you can hardly do that. Miss Briggs is putting Mr. Wong in Mr. Cuppy's room.'

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‘Oh . . . Mr. Wong.’ He looked puzzled.

‘Yes. He came a few minutes ago.’

‘But Mr. Cuppy . . . he is not well . . .’

‘I’m quite sure he’ll be all right. Miss Briggs told me just now that she’d opened the windows in there and shut the door.’

This appeared to disturb him. Watching him, reflectively, Elsie found herself entertaining the, to her, curious notion that this Chinese servant might be something of a person. His face had much of the simple honesty of Mr. Wong’s. Faithfulness she sensed, and a deeply ingrained courtesy and kindliness. She’d never, before this strange evening, thought about the yellow people beyond an occasional glance at a laundryman. It hadn’t occurred to her that there might be different types of Chinamen. ‘After all,’ she thought now, ‘there’s hundreds of millions of ’em. I’m going to read something about ’em. They did make beautiful things. And they’ve had great poets. Interesting!’

He was speaking again, with the gracious respectful air that stirred in her an odd sensation of crudeness, of newness. After all, it was an old, old race. ‘I worry, Miss. Miss

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Briggs shouldn't open windows on first floor. We always lock. Maybe burglars.'

'Oh, do you think so? Away out here?'

'I dunno. But I worry. Mr. Cuppy has so much.' He moved his hands in a graceful gesture as if to include the whole house. 'So much. Too much. Money can't buy.' He stood, considering.

'Well . . . I'll confess, Sin, I don't know what to say. I'm so new here, you see. I'm afraid I can't help you.'

His face still wore that intent expression. 'I worry. I don't think I sleep. But' — with a note of gentle apology, this — 'I musn't trouble Miss.' He turned slowly away, and she heard him repeat 'I don't think I sleep.' Then, 'Good-night, Miss.'

'Good-night, Sin.'

Closing the door and moving slowly over to the dresser, Elsie decided to look up books on the Chinese people as soon as she could get back to New York. The Public Library would advise her. Well, these queer Cuppys had certainly opened a new world to her. Or an old world. She owed them for that — 'Fancy my liking Chinamen!' she thought, as she considered her excitingly painted face in

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the mirror. 'Mr. Wong, and now this butler!' And then, aloud, in a rather shaken, husky voice, came this widely inclusive expression of a complicated mood — 'Some evening! *Some evening!*'

It was a long time before she could close her eyes. She was awakened . . . hardly a moment later, it seemed . . . by a tapping on the door. A tapping that seemed to have been figuring in her troubled dreams. As if it had been going on for some little time. Bright sunlight was streaming into the room. She rubbed her eyes and looked at the watch on her wrist. It was a quarter to nine. She'd meant to be on her way by this time. Confused, feeling rather upset, she put on her slippers and went to the door.

It was Miss Briggs, in an old gray and gold kimono and slippers. An ashen, trembling, staring Miss Briggs. She came in a bewildered way into the room and dropped into a chair.

'I'm shaken,' she said querulously. 'They've gone.'

'Who have gone?' asked Elsie shortly.

'Sin always brings me my coffee at a quarter to eight. I woke up at quarter past and

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realized that he hadn't come. So I put on this wrap and went downstairs. There wasn't anybody there. Not anybody. Not even in the kitchen. I went up to their rooms then. They've gone. Run away in the night. I called up the garage but nobody answered. So I went out there. Both the chauffeurs are gone, too. The queer thing is, they've left their things. Their bags. Clothes hanging in the closets. All that.'

So she rattled nervously on. Elsie listened rather impatiently. It was, all said and done, nothing to her. Impatiently, swiftly, she dressed. After all, it was an emergency. She'd have to help as much as she could.

They went downstairs together, and into the side hall. There Miss Briggs stopped abruptly, with an 'Oh!' and caught at Elsie's arm.

'What is it?' asked Elsie.

'The door!' She was looking toward the den. 'I left it shut last night!'

Together they moved toward it and looked within. And they saw what had been Mr. Cuppy, lying in a sprawling heap on the floor. His head had been crushed in as if with an axe, and lay in a pool of blood and brain.

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Miss Briggs screamed.

'Wait!' said Elsie. 'That's no good!' Her own knees were giving way, and she was aware of a pang of nausea; but her mind was the sort that clears in emergencies. 'Wait!' she cried again. She hadn't an idea for what. But the cap was in her mind. She made her way to the Chinese room. Miss Briggs, sobbing hysterically, followed.

The secret drawer in the table behind the huge vase had been pried open. The cap was gone.

II

4

THE doctor's name was Obry. Elsie was fully ten minutes in getting that bit of information out of the now wholly ungoverned housekeeper. She telephoned, and then cajoled Miss Briggs into helping make coffee. All those queer persons upstairs would be roused before long. Roused and shocked. They'd want breakfast. And there were no servants. An oppressive sense of horror seemed to fill the house like some noxious gas. Shortly Dr. Obry arrived and took charge. He'd have to tell Mrs. Cuppy. Then the local Chief of Police appeared, with a sergeant and others. Then the Coroner. Big fat men. Political type. Two men in civilian clothes said they were from the State Police barrack near by. A tall, spread-eagly young man proved to be an assistant District Attorney. A Mr. Atkinson. One curious fact — they picked up a pillow in the side hall. Lying on the floor. A regular bed pillow in a white slip. That notion of running away filled

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Elsie's mind. She couldn't, of course. Not now. Not with an unexplained dead body in the house. The doctor was a long time upstairs. Having his troubles, doubtless, with Mrs. Cuppy.

Police officers went through the house, waking the guests. Shortly these straggled downstairs, some fully dressed, others in bathrobes or kimonos. Miss Eames, the actress, had evidently forgotten, in her excitement, to rub off the cold cream that covered her face. Without their Chinese costumes and their paint the women were hard to identify. Mechanically Elsie set out the coffee and toast. Not one of them appeared to recognize her. She caught John Dane taking her in with a puzzled expression. But a moment later he coolly asked her for a spoon. . . . Funny! She'd forgotten all the spoons!

She found herself looking much at Mr. Wong, who had slumped down in his chair at the end of the table. Others were looking at him too. Rather suspiciously. Of course. They hadn't seen him before.

Mr. Delos leaned back in his chair and beckoned. Elsie bent over him. 'What on earth does it mean?' he whispered. 'Police

and all! Treating us like this! What's happened?"

Elsie, who'd thought herself cool enough, found great difficulty in speaking. But then suddenly her voice broke through, 'Mr. Cuppy has been — well — murdered.'

Mr. Delos cried out, 'Good God!' And the others gasped.

Elsie, as suddenly and intemperately as she had spoken, burst into tears and ran out into the butler's pantry. For the moment she was as weakly useless as the overwhelmed Miss Briggs. But only for the moment. It was merely nerves, of course. Reaction to a shock. She wasn't the weepy sort.

The officials were sitting, for what appeared to be a sort of preliminary hearing, in the Chinese room. A policeman led Miss Briggs in there. She wept all the way.

An undertaker's wagon appeared; and the Coroner left the Chinese room long enough to supervise the removal of the body. Then he went back.

Elsie had to do something, so she set to work carrying out dishes from the dining-room and stacking them in the butler's pantry.

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A nurse arrived, by taxi, and went upstairs. A caterer appeared and took charge of the kitchen.

The spread-eagly Mr. Atkinson made a speech from the dining-room doorsill. 'We regret the necessity of putting you all to inconvenience. But I assure you we will not detain you longer than is absolutely necessary. Until further instructions, nobody is to leave the property.' With which he hurried back to the Chinese room.

The guests sat moodily about, after that, talking a little, the women lighting cigarettes, the men cigarettes or pipes. They dropped matches and flicked ashes, carelessly, about the rug. Elsie wondered, in dismal idleness of brain, who'd clean up after them.

The policeman brought Miss Briggs (weeping) back to the kitchen, then came for Elsie. Meekly she followed the big blue back. Her turn now, eh! They went out into the main hall. There the officer, observing that the door to the Chinese room was closed, offered her a chair and himself drifted off a few steps to chat in low tones with a fellow who appeared to be watching the front door. Bits of their talk came to her ear — 'I see the Dis-

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trict Attorney's got a man here already. Whadda you know about that!'

'Oh, sure! Atkinson. Lives here in town, you know. Out Myrtle Avenue.'

'Stepping right into it, I'd say.'

'Well, it's a big case.'

'Oh, sure! N. Jonas Cuppy! Tough.'

'I'll say so.'

'Funny about that pillow that was found in the hall down here.'

'Yeah. They couldn't 'a' killed him with that, hardly.'

5

That door opened, and still another policeman beckoned her within. There the various representatives of authority were assembled, seated about the center table. The Coroner indicated a vacant chair. Mr. Atkinson explained, 'It is our duty, Miss — Miss Penn, to get the story of every person who was in the house last night. Please tell us yours. As we understand it, you arrived early in the evening to begin work as Mrs. Cuppy's secretary. Please tell us exactly what happened from that moment. What you saw and heard and did.'

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That shouldn't be difficult. In direct, simple language she recited her narrative. Matters that were merely personal, she omitted. There seemed to be no object in dwelling on Mr. Cuppy's fuddled attempt to embrace her, or on the queer little scene with John Dane in the rock garden.

'Mr. Cuppy' — one of the State officers speaking; they addressed him as Mr. Carlock — 'Mr. Cuppy drank a great deal during the evening, I gather.'

'Yes. A great deal.'

'When did he lose consciousness?'

'I couldn't say exactly. Dinner was at eight o'clock, about. I would put it at somewhere between nine and ten.'

'Then the Chinese servants carried him into the den and left him there on the sofa?'

'Yes.'

'After that you went out into the rock garden. Were you alone?'

'I was then.'

'Not later?'

'No.'

'Some one joined you there?'

'Yes.'

'Who?'

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‘Mr. Dane.’

Mr. Carlock consulted a paper. ‘Mr. John Dane, the artist, eh?’

‘Yes.’

‘Had you known him before?’

‘No. Never heard of him. I didn’t know any of these people.’

‘Why did Mr. Dane go out there?’

‘I haven’t an idea, unless it was to get a breath of air. He found me, and sat down on the bench. We chatted for a while.’

‘About anything in particular?’

‘No.’

‘What was your idea in going out there alone?’

‘Well . . . I wanted to think.’

‘What about?’

Mr. Atkinson broke in here. ‘You understand, Miss Penn, that by answering our questions freely and completely you will be helping us, perhaps more than you or any of us realize at the moment. What we are trying to get together now is a rough survey of the background. I should like to ask one or two questions, if Mr. Carlock will permit me . . . Thank you. . . . Miss Briggs has told us how she put out the light in the den, opened the

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windows — a little way, she says — and then shut the door. Do you know anything about that?’

‘Only what she told me this morning. Substantially as you put it.’

‘Then this morning, when you came downstairs with her — did you happen to notice that one of the den windows was wide open?’

‘No. I merely looked in through the door; saw the — the body; ran in here, thinking of the Chinese cap —’

‘Because it had been left in your charge?’

‘Yes.’

‘Mrs. Cuppy, you have said, gave you the cap. Told you to throw it away or keep it yourself?’

‘Oh, that! I didn’t pay much attention to that. She wasn’t . . . herself.’

‘What happened after you found that the cap had been stolen?’

‘I made Miss Briggs give me the name of the family physician.’

‘Miss Briggs, I imagine, was in a rather hysterical state.’

‘Decidedly. I called Dr. Obry, and then tried to steady Miss Briggs down enough to

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get a little breakfast ready for the guests. We were at that until Dr. Obry came.'

'Did you, at any time last evening, observe any actions on the part of the Chinese servants that might suggest ill-feeling? Understand, we do not, at the present time, seriously suspect them. It is quite likely that they fled in a panic when they discovered the tragedy this morning. That one wide-open window in the den suggests that the murder was committed by outsiders. Possibly Chinese gunmen, who knew of the pearl cap. From your interview with Mr. Wong, that seems anything but improbable. And your talk with the butler, Sin, evidently impressed you favorably. But we must consider everything. How about those servants?'

'They behaved perfectly, as far as I saw. I remember watching them as they carried Mr. Cuppy into the den, and wondering what they could be thinking of us white people. But you couldn't tell a thing from their faces.'

'Thank you. Now, if you don't mind, tell Mr. Carlock what it was you went out into the rock garden to think about.'

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‘Well — I felt rather uncomfortable about the situation here. As a job, I mean.’

‘Why?’

‘I didn’t . . . didn’t like the atmosphere of the house.’

‘Why not?’ Carlock, quickly.

‘Oh, I don’t know. The liquor, partly.’

‘Were they all drinking?’

‘Oh, yes. All but Mr. Dane. I’d noticed that he hadn’t taken much.’

‘Perhaps he didn’t like the atmosphere either.’

‘No. He said he didn’t. He asked me if I thought I could stick it.’

‘Had you been drinking?’

‘No. I never drink at all.’

‘And you were thinking you perhaps couldn’t stick it.’

‘Yes. Before I went to bed I’d about made up my mind to slip out in the morning before they were up and go back to town. I didn’t like it at all.’

‘Why not, exactly?’

‘Well — must I answer that?’

‘If you will be so good.’

‘I didn’t like either Mr. or Mrs. Cuppy.’

‘Why not?’

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'Well . . . Mrs. Cuppy seemed to me rather artificial and insincere.'

'And Mr. Cuppy?'

'I don't like to speak unkindly of the — the dead ——'

'Naturally.'

'Well — he put his arm around me. Just after we were introduced. Over there, behind that big vase.' There! She'd told that, after all!

'Who introduced you?'

'Mrs. Cuppy.'

'Where was she at the moment?'

'She'd gone to the door. She thought we were following, I suppose.'

'And why weren't you?'

'I'd waited there a moment because I wanted to look at that beautiful lantern. I thought Mr. Cuppy had gone out with his wife. He came up behind me.'

'I see. Did he have anything more to say to you, after that?'

'Nothing. I didn't see him at all, except at the farther end of the dinner table, until they carried him into the den.'

'How long were you and Mr. Dane together in the rock garden?'

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'I don't know. Perhaps twenty minutes.'

'Then you returned to the house?'

'He did.'

'Left you out there?'

'Yes.'

'Wasn't that a little odd?'

'I don't know.' She was being drawn in pretty deeply. But these men, after all, represented the law. She mustn't try to evade them. 'The fact is,' she added, 'Mrs. Cuppy came out there looking for him.'

'Looking for Mr. Dane?'

'Yes.'

'Had Mrs. Cuppy been drinking?'

'Well . . . yes. Decidedly.'

'How do you know?'

'I saw it. She'd had quite a lot. And as she came over the bridge near where we were sitting, I could see that she was unsteady on her feet.'

'What did she say?'

'To him?'

'To anybody.'

'I . . . I rather hesitate to tell little matters that have no bearing on the murder.'

The Coroner spoke. 'You will have to let us be judge of that side of it, Miss Penn.'

Lady Can Do

But first we want all the facts. All of 'em!

'Very well,' thought Elsie, 'I'll just let it go, then.' And she did. Firmly. 'She said just about this — "Oh, there you are! So you thought you could hide from me, John Dane! You come right back with me." . . . Then, when he'd moved off a little way, she came to me and leaned over me. I had to hold her up. And she said — "You're pretty, and you're sly. But take my advice, my dear, and look around a little more carefully before you try to steal a man. Might be somebody else's man. Just a friendly warning." '

'Mr. Dane had been staying in the house longer than the others, hadn't he?'

'I believe so. He'd been making a pastel portrait of Mrs. Cuppy.'

'Very good, Miss Penn. Thank you. That is all for the present.'

Mr. Atkinson spoke. 'You have given us your whole story now, Miss Penn?'

'All I can think of.'

'As we understand the matter of the pearl cap — Mrs. Cuppy, considerably in liquor, simply left it in your hands when she wished to dance. You had gone to her to tell her of Mr. Wong. She refused to listen. You didn't

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know what to do with the cap, but took it into the Chinese room. On the way across the hall you saw only Mr. Stromberg and Mr. Dane. Mr. Stromberg you brushed aside. But Mr. Dane followed you into this room and told you of the hidden drawer. You and he put the cap away there. You thought you heard some other person in the room. Mr. Dane looked and assured you that there was nobody. As you went out you saw Mr. Stromberg sitting in the hall. And excepting for a few words with Mr. Wong in the dining-room, you saw none of them again until this morning. That is about the gist of it, is it not?’

‘Perfectly.’

‘Just one more question — where did you leave Mr. Dane?’

Elsie knit her brows. ‘I really don’t know. I felt nervous and tired, and my one thought was to get upstairs by myself.’

‘You didn’t say good-night, even?’

‘No. I suppose he followed me out of this room. But if . . . if you are thinking . . . well, that Mr. Dane might have . . .’ She shivered a little.

‘Oh, no, Miss Penn. We’re merely trying

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to piece this whole background together. It's something of a picture puzzle. . . . By the way, it occurs to me that you must be a stenographer.'

'Yes. I am. . . . I just meant to say about Mr. Dane, as a mere first impression, that he seemed to me to be the one decent, really civilized person in the house.'

'I see. Now, Miss Penn, it would help materially if you would consent to remain here and take down what the others have to say. There would be no hurry about transcribing it. But at some later time we might find it useful to look over all these stories as they were taken down word for word.'

'I shall be glad to help you in any way that I can,' said Elsie.

'I'm sure of that. And while we're sending for Mr. Delos, I'll ask you to glance over these rough notes of Miss Briggs's story. If there's anything there you can't make out, ask me about it. Thank you.' Then to the policeman at the door, 'Bring Mr. Delos!'

Elsie looked at the scribbled pages. A fairly detailed, if condensed, story. Only one of the notes eluded her eyes. She pointed it out to Mr. Atkinson. 'Simply,' explained that

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keen young man, 'that Miss Briggs had to stay up to lock doors and windows and clean up a little after they all went upstairs. About two o'clock. Everything in confusion. Mr. Stromberg asleep on couch in living-room. Decided not to disturb him. Went to bed.'

Elsie hurried upstairs to her room for notebooks and pencils. It was going to be a relief to be occupied. She felt that. Returning downstairs, on the lower landing, she encountered Mr. Stromberg running up, carrying his overcoat and hat. He stopped and quickly smiled. 'Just gathering up my things,' he said. 'I suppose they'll let us go soon?'

'Haven't an idea,' said Elsie, and went on down.

6

One by one the sleepy, cross guests gave their stories. Mr. Delos sputtered indignantly over being treated as a suspicious character. Miss Eames yawned as she languidly, briefly, answered the questions. The Gargoyle proved to have theories, and cackled excitedly until the Chief shut him off. Not one of the lot had any really illuminating facts to offer. The

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evening had been and would remain a good deal of a haze in their minds.

Gradually Elsie found herself catching something of the impersonal atmosphere in which these determined men were going at their task, and even found herself, during the brief rests, while the officials were talking, mentally piecing together the odd bits of evidence that came to light here and there. Toward noon the sergeant entered and announced that the reporters had begun to arrive from New York. He brought, also, a blood-stained hatchet. They had found it in the shrubbery under the den windows. It was the sort that can be bought at any hardware shop. Chinese gunmen might have brought it, or it might have been picked up in the Cuppy cellar. You couldn't say.

'Keep those reporters out,' said Atkinson, as he examined the hatchet. Carlock looked it over next, through a pocket microscope.

'That goes,' remarked the Chief to the sergeant. 'Keep them clean off the place. If you need more men, call up headquarters.'

Mr. Wong was brought in. Again, as Elsie considered the elderly figure and the crushed expression on the round wrinkled oriental

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face, she felt simplicity and honesty in the man. That Mr. Carlock again took up the burden of question.

'You arrived here late last evening, Mr. Wong?'

'Yes. So I did. I have come on the ten-forty train from New York.'

'And you rode out here in a taxicab from the local station?'

'Yes, sir.'

'Why did you come? You had not been invited to the house party?'

'No. But I have had a telephone call.'

'From whom?'

'I don't know.'

'Man or woman?'

'It was a man. A Chinese man.'

'What did he say to you?'

Mr. Wong sat motionless for a long moment, thinking. The men about the table watched him intently. Finally he said, 'If I can do I will tell the story.'

'In your own way, you mean? Very well. Do so.'

'I am interest', much of us in this country are interest', in the Nationalist Party of Canton. The party of Sun Yat Sen and Chang

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K'ai Shek. I have give money. For it is war in China. Men feel.' He put his hand on his heart. 'Men are excite'. Chang is at the Yangtze River. But he must have money. More and more money it is all the time. Men of our Party in this country give too much. A little time ago I am told that Hung Lo . . . he is Shanghai man now . . . Hung Lo sent to Ting Pao . . .'

'Who is Ting Pao?'

'New York man, Ting Pao. Very big man.'

'And connected with the Nationalist Party?'

'Oh, yes! Hung Lo send the wonderful pearl cap of Empress Tzu Hsi . . . what you call Empress Dowager. He has ask' Ting Pao to sell the cap because New York is city of too much money. Ting Pao has talk' with me. Because I am merchant. He has said I am man who finds rich buyer. And then Ting Pao send the money to Hung Lo in Shanghai. And Hung Lo give money to Chang.'

'Then the pearl cap was to be sold to raise funds for Chang's military campaign?'

'Oh, yes!'

'And this pearl cap was really of considerable value, Mr. Wong?'

'Oh, yes!' The Chinaman's hands fluttered

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upward. 'Very great! Maybe two hundred thousand. Maybe three hundred thousand. I have said I will sell for most possible. And I ask no commission. It is a matter of great hurry. No time. I think of Mr. Cuppy. He buys so much Chinese beautiful things. All the time he buys.' The slanting eyes swept about at the cabinets full of carved jade and nephrite and rock crystal that stood about the walls, at the long scroll paintings that hung, under glass, above them, at the richly ornamented screens, the old bronzes, the exquisite porcelains, the snuff bottles, the carved furniture. 'Last night when I am eating my dinner, I am thinking about Ting Pao. The pearl cap must have come. I wonder. Then I sit a while. Then I am called to telephone, and the man tells me that if I do not give back the cap before midnight, I am to be killed by hatchet-man. That I cannot escape, the voice tells me. Naturally I am surprise'. I cannot think what he means. I ask him to tell me, for I do not know. He says to me I do know. That I am liar. But I make him tell. He says to me after long talk that men steal the pearl cap and sell it to Mr. Cuppy. He says to me I know these thieves. He says I

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make them do it and keep all the money myself.' Mr. Wong struck his breast with both hands. Trembling hands. 'Never before do they say this. That I too am thief. Never in my life do they say that of me. And they say I will give back the pearl cap before midnight or I am killed by hatchet-men. So I take the train here. I try to see Mr. Cuppy. But Mr. Cuppy is sick. In there.' He pointed excitedly to the den. 'And no can see Mrs. Cuppy. I think I will buy the cap. I think of myself. And I think of Chang K'ai Shek, too. I am not rich man. I have my home. And I have bonds. Maybe one hundred and sixty-seventy thousand. I get all my bonds. They are in my safe. I bring them here.' He struck his chest again. 'I give all my bonds to Mr. Cuppy if he will give me the pearl cap. No can do. They take me to sleep in his bed because he is sick down here. That is all I know.'

'You think these hatchet-men followed you here, Mr. Wong?'

'Oh, yes! I think so.'

'But why should they kill Mr. Cuppy?'

'I cannot think. But maybe they think he is me. Maybe they come in by the open window . . .'

Lady Can Do

‘Oh, you know about the open windows?’

‘Oh, yes! All this morning I hear the people talk. Too much talk. Maybe’ — eagerly, this — ‘Maybe they climb in the window. They hear a man sleeping. Maybe it is me. They kill him.’ He was keen, this old Chinaman; despite the tragic emotion in his breast his brain was clear. ‘Then they hunt in this room. They find the pearl cap and take it away.’

‘Why do you think the servants all ran off?’

‘These boys? Oh, they find the body of Mr. Cuppy. They are scared. They run. They think the police arrest them. You see, Chinese man never takes responsibility, never, if can help, because if he do take it, then must keep his word until they kill him. These boys are afraid. So they run.’

‘You know these boys of Mr. Cuppy?’

‘Oh, no. Only one. Often, I am here. They know me. I speak to them. But Sin I know. He work for me. Until last year. I have give him to Mr. Cuppy last year.’

‘Do you think you could find him?’

Mr. Wong looked doubtful. ‘It will be very hard. I do not know.’

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'Is he, in your judgment, the sort who would run away?'

'Sin? I do not think so. Oh, no! I do not understand that.'

'Thank you, Mr. Wong. That is all.'

'Then I can go. It is very important. I must go home.'

'Not quite yet. By evening, perhaps. As soon as we have cleared up our work here.'

'Thank you. Thank you too much.' At the door he hesitated. Turned back. His face worked. There were tears in his eyes. 'It is time too hard, too dangerous, in China. Chinese men in America are too excite'. There is, we say in English, hot blood.' With which, brokenly, slowly, he went out.

When the door had closed on his bent figure, the men looked at one another.

'A rather interesting theory,' remarked the Chief.

'Still,' said Carlock, 'there was no ransacking of the place. Whoever took the pearl cap knew where it was. Nothing else was so much as touched. I have sent that table in town to be examined for finger prints. We may find a lead there.'

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'A curious angle,' observed Atkinson, 'is that we have learned so far of only two persons who knew where the cap was hidden. One is Dane. The other' — he turned, courteously enough, to Elsie — 'is you, Miss Penn. And, frankly, I haven't the slightest suspicion of either of you. Or, naturally, you wouldn't be here, in our confidence. I know something, too, of John Dane. I happen to know one or two of his friends in town. I have long admired his work. I am quite willing to accept him as a gentleman.'

'There is still' — Carlock — 'the possibility of a third person in the room when Miss Penn and Dane hid the pearl cap.'

'Yes, there is that. We'll keep an eye out for developments there. But let's get on with our questioning. We have — let me see — three left. Mrs. Cuppy, Stromberg, and Dane. Dr. Obry, how soon will Mrs. Cuppy be able to talk?'

'Certainly not until later in the day, if then,' replied the physician. 'She is in a pretty bad way. I have given her a bromide. And I have a nurse up there.'

'We'll have Stromberg in.' The attendant

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officer left the room. 'This fellow is an odd one,' said Atkinson. 'A Dane or Norwegian or North German. Hard to place. An adventurer, I rather think, who had worked round the Cuppys. They finance these expeditions of his, I've understood. Some of you may remember the queer publicity when he was lecturing last year on his Thibetan show. He claimed to have climbed some tremendous mountain out there. But stories drifted back that he didn't climb it. And there was a story got round that his motion pictures, presumably taken from the peak, really showed a familiar view from another and much lower peak that a lot of people have climbed. Some expert even figured out that he couldn't possibly have carried the picture machine up there, along with other supplies and the oxygen tanks, with the number of porters he had.'

'And wasn't there,' asked the doctor, 'some trouble about a member of his expedition that died under unexplained circumstances?'

'That's right. That English boy.'

The door opened. A police sergeant appeared. 'Chief,' he reported, 'the pillow that was found in the hall belonged on the bed of

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Sin, the butler.' The Chief merely nodded. And Elsie made a note.

A moment later Stromberg was ushered in.

7

He was tall, lean, strong, and moved with the grace of a wild animal. But Elsie didn't like his face. It was thin, and very keen. She considered the close-set, bright eyes, as they took in the circle of officials. A good deal of sharp thinking went on, surely, behind them. But he told his story well enough, in a slightly foreign accent, of the evening party, the costumes, the collapse of Mr. Cuppy. About the sequence of minor events he exhibited a measure of confusion, but admitted that he had drunk a good deal. At about two o'clock, he said, they all went upstairs. Of what may have happened after that he knew nothing until he was roused by a policeman. Once or twice he looked directly at Elsie, but plainly didn't know her. His room, he said, was on the second floor, in the rear, next to that of John Dane. They shared a bath.

Mr. Carlock asked, 'Do you recollect seeing Miss Penn when she put away Mrs. Cuppy's pearl cap?'

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'I remember meeting her in the hall. I had been dancing with Mrs. Cuppy and was cut out. I wandered into the hall, with a glass in my hand, I think. Miss Penn came through with Mrs. Cuppy's cap in her hand and went into this room. Dane followed her. I sat down in the hall and finished my drink. Then I went back to the living-room.'

Dane was called. Elsie found herself bridling a little. It had seemed, at breakfast, as if he should have recognized her. He'd certainly seen more of her than Stromberg. He'd talked with her, looked at her, kissed her. At the thought a touch of color crept into her face. She hoped these men wouldn't notice. They apparently didn't. She must compose herself. This flutter of the nerves was absurd.

He took his place without so much as looking at her. Took her for granted. She might have been a piece of furniture. 'Well,' she thought, bridling again, 'I like that!'

Dane's story was the simplest and clearest of all. He knew precisely what he had and hadn't seen during the evening; and he seemed gravely eager to help. Elsie noted

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the distinctly good impression he made on the men about the table.

There was an interruption while the Chief spoke to the sergeant, at the farther end of the room. The officials relaxed in their chairs. Dane turned to Elsie.

'I beg pardon,' he remarked, 'but aren't you Miss Penn?'

She nodded, with more than a trace of brusqueness.

'Of course I should have recognized you. I'm sorry.'

Mr. Atkinson spoke up. 'Isn't it rather odd that you didn't, Mr. Dane?'

'I don't think so. The ladies were all in costume, and were painted up in the Chinese manner. Miss Penn arrived late, and I didn't see her until she appeared in that get-up.'

'There's one rather odd little matter, Mr. Dane. We have no wish to pry into merely personal affairs that can have no bearing on the case. But when Mrs. Cuppy found you in the rock garden she addressed a rather peculiar remark to Miss Penn. Something to the effect that she was a sly girl, and that she'd better not undertake to steal a man until

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she'd looked around and made sure whose man it was.'

'I didn't hear what she said to Miss Penn. I had moved away.'

'But do you know what she meant?'

'No.'

'Has there been . . . but I'll put the question this way: When you returned to the house with Mrs. Cuppy was anything said by either of you that might throw light on the remark?'

Dane plainly hesitated. 'I suppose, Mr. Atkinson, that I really should speak with the utmost frankness, even concerning my hostess.'

'It is imperative.'

'Well, Mrs. Cuppy was not at all herself. She had drunk a good deal. I had not. The whole situation had, by that time, become distasteful to me. As I told Miss Penn, it was my intention to leave at the first possible moment. I'd planned to go to-day. Mrs. Cuppy did say a few rather foolish things. She is a pretty woman with all the power that wealth brings, and accustomed to having her own way. I took her straight to the living-room, drew Mr. Stromberg into conversation with her, and left her with him.'

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‘Thank you, Mr. Dane. That is all, for the present.’

Dane went out.

The Chief returned to the table with a small parcel rolled up in a newspaper. Solemnly, impressively, he laid this on the table and looked about him at the others. All leaned forward in quick responsiveness. Slowly, with that hushed, impressive manner, he unrolled the newspaper, and there lay the pearl cap. ‘Gentlemen,’ he remarked heavily, ‘here it is.’

They stared. Elsie’s nerves tingled and crinkled, clear to the roots of her hair. The Chief turned to her. ‘Can you identify it, Miss Penn?’ And pushed it toward her. She took it up, mechanically, and turned it round and round in her hands. But at the moment she couldn’t speak. Her excited thoughts were all out of hand. Here they had found it! Here in the house! Then . . . ! Her unsteady fingers fumbled with it. Felt those amazing strings of matched pearls that had disturbed Mrs. Cuppy by getting into her eyes. Felt the big oddly shaped single pearls that were set into the rich ornamentation of the crown; oval pearls, oblong pearls, several of fascinat-

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ingly irregular shapes. Never in her life had Elsie seen any so large or of such fine iridescence. Gathered, each a gem in a hundred thousand, from the farthest shores of the Indies to please an Empress. She was turning the cap round and round, a confused misty excitement shining in her eyes, her color high, her lips slightly parted. . . . Partly hidden in the filigree work of silver gilt, she spied an empty setting. One of the single pearls was missing. She recalled one, the largest of all, shaped like a pear, that had hung among the silver-gilt leaves. It was gone. She was about to point out the empty setting . . .

‘It was found,’ went on the Chief, ‘in the closet of John Dane’s room. Tucked away behind an extra blanket on a shelf.’

Elsie’s nerveless fingers dropped it to the table. For the moment she couldn’t breathe.

The men looked at one another. Atkinson spoke up. ‘Hmm! Well! Pretty extraordinary, that! It does appear to fix the murder right here in the house. What have you done about Dane, Chief?’

‘Held him. I told the Sergeant to get him away very quietly.’

Elsie’s thoughts were clearing. These men

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had the right idea. Take everything as it came. Take it as a job. Let a fact stand as a fact, without emotion, without color. She could do that, too. She was the mental type. Anyway, John Dane was nothing to her. Nothing!

She didn't know that Atkinson was intently watching her. His abrupt question, when it came, startled her. But hardly more than her own abrupt reply. Her brain was clicking now. She could be quick. As quick as any of them.

'Miss Penn,' said he brusquely, 'what do you make of all this?'

'Mr. Atkinson,' said she, 'I should like very much to have a look at Mr. Stromberg's overcoat. I saw him carrying it upstairs a while back. Couldn't you have an officer bring it from his room?'

The officials were all watching her now. Atkinson said, 'Certainly!' The Chief nodded to the attendant; who went out and returned shortly with the coat. Elsie spread it out on the table and went through the outer pockets. Frowned impatiently.

'There'd be an inside breast pocket,' remarked Atkinson.

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Elsie was flopping the coat over, when Carlock, who was feeling along the bottom of the skirt, cried, 'Wait a minute! Here's something!' But Elsie's quick hand was already in that breast pocket. 'It has been cut along the bottom!' said she; and slid her whole arm down inside the lining, feeling along the hem of the skirt. Her fingers closed on the lump that Carlock had felt through the cloth. She drew it out . . . a pear-shaped pearl not far from an inch in length . . . it fitted nicely into the setting and completed the design.

'A very neat bit of thinking,' said Atkinson, with a friendly nod.

'Oh, no,' she replied. 'They have adjoining rooms, you know. I suppose Mr. Stromberg did follow Mr. Dane and me into this room, then slipped into the hall. He told you he went upstairs with the others; but Miss Briggs found him asleep on a couch in the living-room, after all the rest had gone up, and she left him there. Somehow or other, during what was left of the night, he got the cap. He cut this inside pocket and dropped the cap down inside the lining. When he finally did go upstairs he left the coat hanging down here in the hall.'

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‘Might have, at that,’ said Carlock. ‘He knew he couldn’t hide it in his bedroom. Not too successfully. And we might have looked at those coats and wraps all day without giving them a thought.’

‘Then, you see,’ Elsie resumed, ‘whatever his reasons, he took the coat upstairs this morning. He even seemed to want to explain, when we passed on the stairs. But I wasn’t interested then. From his room, it was a simple matter to take the cap through the bathroom they shared into Mr. Dane’s room. As you gentlemen know, I never saw Mr. Dane before last evening. He is nothing to me. Nothing to me at all! But if my judgment is worth anything, he is not a thief and he is not a murderer.’

‘Plausible enough,’ mused Atkinson.

Dr. Obry, with a remark about having a look at Mrs. Cuppy, left the room.

‘Mike!’ called the Chief, ‘tell the sergeant to come here!’ Then, to the assistant District Attorney, ‘Do you want to hold Dane, Mr. Atkinson?’

‘No.’

To the sergeant, thus the Chief, ‘Let John Dane loose, Jim. Nothing there. Just

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have him stick around with the rest of 'em.'

'We went through his waste-basket, Chief. Found a torn-up letter. Torn up mighty small. Henry Beall's piecing it together. Take quite a while. Part was burned. In the soap dish, I'd say. From the looks o' things, as if he'd started to burn it and then changed his mind and just tore it up. Or maybe he'd burned one page.'

'Very good, Jim.'

'How about arresting Stromberg, Chief?' asked Atkinson.

'I was thinking we'd better not. He can't get away. Better have him in again. Don't let him suspect we know a thing. Maybe we can snarl him up.'

'I'd suggest a bite of lunch, Chief,' said Atkinson. 'It's after two. We've covered a bit of ground these four hours. Then we can take up Stromberg again, and Mrs. Cuppy. You'd better stir around, Miss Penn. Step outside if you want air. It's confining work.' This assistant District Attorney was making it clear that he'd taken a liking to her. Odd how quickly you always caught that undertone of the personal in a man's speech and

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manner. She was inclined to believe that the other men sensed it too. Have to watch her step. You always had to, with men around. She felt suddenly lonely. Easy to grow pretty bitter about that sort of thing.

Dr. Obry reappeared. 'Gentlemen,' he said, 'I believe we can talk with Mrs. Cuppy this afternoon. But not all of us. Two or three at the outside. Miss Penn, I'm going to put you behind a screen in the doorway of an adjoining room. You must keep perfectly still. I shall carry a notebook myself to cover what rustling you may be unable to avoid. You see, gentlemen' — he was looking about the circle, very gravely. For the first time Elsie became aware of a tension among the officials . . . perhaps it was that suggestion of limiting their number . . . were they all, in a way, watching one another . . . But Dr. Obry was talking on — 'You see, Mrs. Cuppy seems to me to be in a frame of mind that may — I am not certain, but it may — lead us into a worse tangle than anything that has come up yet. I have preferred that you hear her for yourselves and form your impressions at first hand.'

Elsie slipped out at that point. She couldn't

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eat. Not just then. Her head ached. She couldn't face those chafing, spiritually bedraggled guests of the house. She wandered out through the *porte cochère* and crossed the driveway to the rock garden. By dim pools and craggy little banks she strolled. Over that almost semi-circular bridge. Here was the stone bench where she had sat in the evening. Here John Dane had spoken darkly of some sudden, secret difficulty — 'If I weren't in such a ticklish situation here . . . the damndest mess, just to-night'. . . why had he said that? Oh, well, she wasn't responsible for him.

She saw him approaching. From the house. He came on over the bridge. He'd ridiculed her when she had told him she was the mental type. Well, she'd show him. She could be a brisk enough little person on occasion. She'd show him.

He stood before her. He looked older. He'd been hurt. Of course. It isn't heartening to be arrested on suspicion of murder. Even of thievery. Something sobering, haunting, about his gray eyes.

'I haven't the faintest notion what it's all about,' he began, in a slow, low voice. 'But

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from what those policemen have dropped, I've gathered that nothing but some rather remarkable bit of quick thinking on your part has saved me from being rather seriously involved in this dreadful case. I'm not going to ask what it was, but I must thank you.'

There was an odd moment, following that speech, during which he appeared hesitant about sitting beside her on the bench. He even rested a knee on it, and then stood rather awkwardly. Just stood there. He seemed to be breathing fast. So was she. And she could feel her pulses in her temples, pounding. Her mouth was dry. He slid, with a self-conscious, almost apologetic manner, down to the seat. And then, dazed, she found his arms about her and her hands clinging to his coat and he was kissing her and she was crying.

He tore her hands away and sprang up. 'Of course,' he said, unsteadily, 'we're completely unstrung. We can't go plumb to pieces. Must keep our heads until this dirty mess is straightened out.'

That was all he said. He went back to the house.

She knew her face was flaming. It wouldn't

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do. She dipped her handkerchief in the pool below and laid it on her cheeks and forehead. She was angry. He needn't have rushed off like that!

III

8

THE Chief and Dr. Obry stood in the *porte cochère*, each with a copy of a pink newspaper. The 'Planet,' of course. A journal that fed notoriously on murder and scandal, on any gross sensation of the moment. Elsie glimpsed headlines three or four inches tall; nothing else. The Doctor remarked that the latter part of the afternoon would be best for the interview with Mrs. Cuppy. Four o'clock or later. The Chief looked at him — cold eyes set in a face that was weather-beaten and was nearly square in shape, a massive, expressionless face — without a word. Dr. Obry hesitated a moment; then folding his paper with a slight motion of impatience, went within.

But the Chief spoke to Elsie . . . in a low, faintly wheedling voice that stirred surprise. A personal note, distinctly. She caught that, with a little flash of resentment. These men . . .

'Mighty quick work,' said he, moving the paper within her vision. 'Wonderful how

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they do it. One of the motorcycle men brought 'em out just now.' And he smiled, complacently.

She read: 'HOUSE GUEST SUSPECT IN CUPPY MURDER — *Chief Urquhart Makes Sensational Disclosure — Brilliant Work By Local Police.*'

'Let me give you a tip, girlie,' he went on, guardedly and still with that smile. 'If you pick anything up, just slip it quietly to me. There's too many cooks on this broth. It's a straight police job. Don't let that fellow Atkinson get too close. He's just a politician and a publicity hound. And not the type for nice young girls to play with. A slick one, that fellow. Safest thing for you'll be to come straight to me.'

Elsie inclined her head noncommittally and stepped within. She felt tired and wretchedly uncomfortable in spirit. How long was this miserable business to continue? How long must she serve these men? Not one among them a gentleman. Mr. Carlock, perhaps, you could trust; he was quiet and businesslike and impersonal. But the others — Mr. Atkinson, the Coroner, the Chief, stirred feelings of disgust. Fighting among

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themselves for publicity. Not much majesty of the law about it. And the newspapers already plunging into it as into some ghastly orgy. She'd heard and read of these travesties on justice. Her head ached. For a cent she'd run away from all of them, and from John Dane. She simply couldn't trust herself to behave rationally in this appalling atmosphere.

Mr. Atkinson was at the telephone. He turned to say quickly, 'I'd like to speak with you, Miss Penn. In the Chinese room. I'll be there in a few minutes.'

She nodded and went on into the main hall. Had he seen that pink newspaper? She wondered. The Chief had stolen a march there. And was grinning like a pig.

She had to pass the wide doorway that gave into the living room. At a table near the door four of the unhappy guests were playing bridge. Miss Eames lay wearily on a couch, with Mr. Ettlethwaite sitting beside her. Mr. Delos, at another table, was playing Canfield. Stromberg stood in the bay window, staring out. That Gargoyle person roamed about the far end of the room drawing gloomy, deep-toned themes from his

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violin. With his bow he seemed to be giving voice to the oppressive horror of the day. The tremolo notes throbbed in the air. One or two of the card players looked around impatiently. A man called, 'Oh, shut up!' But the Gargoyle played on.

Mr. Ettlethwaite saw her, there near the doorway, and started up. She moved away. She didn't want him or any of them talking to her. But he came hurrying out. She didn't like his nose-glasses with their pendant double tape of black silk, or his loose bow tie, or his drink-bleared eyes, or his air of self-conscious vanity.

'Really, you know,' said he, in a confidential tone that stirred resistance in her, 'these boobs are making an awful mess of this thing. They ought to consult with me. All this is right up my street. Perhaps you've read my mystery stories, "The Treasure" and "Number Thirteen."' '

She hadn't, so she didn't say anything; merely looked at him. She must control this feeling of hostility. Her nerves were on edge, naturally. But it was nothing to her.

'I know who committed this murder.'

Still she was silent.

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'It was that Chinaman Sin. A dozen bits of evidence point to him. He hated old Cuppy. And he wanted that cap. Find Sin and you settle your case in an hour. If they'd just consult me . . . the first move must come from them, of course . . .'

'I'm sorry,' said Elsie. 'I'll have to ask you to excuse me.' And moved off down the hall.

Mr. Atkinson was still at the telephone. She glanced into the dining-room. Mr. Wong was in there, sitting alone at a window, a small, crushed figure of a man. Impulsively she entered the room. He didn't look up until she reached his side.

'Mr. Wong,' she asked, 'I heard you say that the man Sin used to work for you.'

'Oh, yes.'

'Do you think he would commit murder?'

'Sin? Oh, no, Miss! Sin good boy. Very good boy.' Curious how he pronounced his 'r's.' He didn't say 'velly,' not quite, yet the 'r's' bothered him. He went on, in his patient, broken way. 'Nobody so honest, so faithful, as good China boy. Sin good boy.'

'Thank you,' said she.

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He resumed his moody watch out the window. Elsie returned to the hall.

There she met Mr. Stromberg. His narrow eyes fastened on her. 'I'm going to ask a favor,' he said, quick and low. 'I've been thinking over what I told them. Will you ask if they will be so good as to hear me again? I have something more to say.'

'Certainly,' she replied, moving off. But he caught her in a quick stride. 'I saw John Dane follow you into the garden. If I were you, I wouldn't let him talk to me. Very smooth, this Dane. But they're not through with him yet. He's in deeper than you or they know. You will see. You're too nice a girl to . . .'

What was the matter with these men? Did they think her responsible for the case? She went into the Chinese room. The Doctor was there, and Mr. Carlock, and the policeman they called Mike. The Chief and the Coroner appeared, and took their seats at the table. The Coroner was smoking a big cigar, twisting it about with unpleasantly mobile lips. Then Mr. Atkinson came rushing in, with a copy of that pink newspaper which he spread dramatically on the table. His face

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wore a strained, white look. He glared at the Chief, who glared back — solid, square-faced, complacently impassive.

‘This is your work,’ he said, with heat.

The Chief merely looked.

‘Build yourself up all you like,’ cried Atkinson, ‘but show me just one more such leak as this and I’ll make you all the trouble you want. You’re asking for it, and you’ll get it.’

Elsie noted Carlock’s thoughtful eyes on the two men. The Chief still took it without a word. You couldn’t tell what was in his mind. ‘He’s as inscrutable as those Chinamen,’ thought Elsie.

‘Do you propose,’ Atkinson, ‘to have the newspapers running this case for us?’ Then, with a little snort of impatience and a muttered, ‘Just try it once more! You’ll see!’ he flung himself into his chair.

There was a long silence. Dr. Obry tapped nervously on the table.

Elsie caught her breath, then said timidly, ‘Mr. Stromberg asked me if he might come in here again.’

They all looked at her.

The Coroner spoke quickly, around his

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cigar. 'Look here, Miss, you're not letting any of these people draw you into talk about the case, are you?'

She couldn't help flaring up at that. 'Certainly not!' He might at least take that cigar out of his face when he talked.

'Let's have him in now,' said Carlock. 'We've got an hour or more before we go upstairs.' He glanced at Stromberg's overcoat, which lay on a chair.

'Put that coat in the den,' he said to the policeman.

The European took the seat at the foot of the table.

'You have something further to say?' asked Carlock.

'Yes.' The narrow, quick eyes flitted about from one stern face to another. The man had, undeniably, considerable distinction. Many would think him handsome. He knew places and people. He had lectured widely. 'Yes. I was greatly troubled when you called me before. I really did not know what to say to you. Of course, I was not under oath.'

The Coroner removed the cigar now, as if to make a blustering remark.

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'We quite understand that,' said Carlock, courteously but quickly.

The Coroner flicked off a long ash on the silken rug — an exquisite piece of weaving in creamy gray and pale rose — and replaced the cigar in his mouth.

'You wish now to correct your statement?' asked Carlock.

'I do. I feel that I must tell you the whole truth.'

'That we must have, Mr. Stromberg.'

'Certainly. I realize it now. No matter what the implications may be. No matter whom it may hit.'

'Certainly.'

'I gave you to understand that I went upstairs when the others did, at two o'clock.'

'And that was not accurate?'

'No. I evidently fell asleep on a couch in the living-room. They must have left me there when they went up. At least that is where I found myself.'

'At what hour?'

'It must have been almost exactly twenty. I remember looking at my watch when I did get upstairs, and it was twenty-five then. Evidently I had hardly

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more than fallen asleep. Something awakened me. I do not know what it could have been. But I found myself lying on the couch. The room was dark. I remember that I distinctly heard some one moving. Something. I felt alarmed, got up at once and tiptoed to the door. Then I realized that there was light in the hall, some light, not very strong. I peeped through the portières — that is, I stood beside the doorway and moved the curtain away a little. The door to this room, the Chinese room, stood open. A person was in the hall, somewhere near the front door. I couldn't see him then. But after a moment he came back to this door, reached in to switch off the light, closed the door, and went upstairs. At that moment, before he switched off the light, I saw him as distinctly as I see you gentlemen now. He was in bare feet and wore a bathrobe. He had a pocket-knife in his hand, which he closed and dropped into the pocket of his bathrobe just before he switched off the light. Then he tiptoed upstairs in the dark.'

'How do you know he tiptoed? You could see him?'

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'No. I mean that I could hear him moving very slowly and carefully.'

'You recognized the man?'

'Yes.'

There was a pause. Elsie's nerves were taut again. Her temples felt as if they would burst.

'Who was it?'

'John Dane.'

There was a long silence. All Elsie could do was to sit motionless. But crazily, as a confusion of uncontrollable thoughts raced through her brain, the phrases ran through them, 'He's nothing to me! Absolutely nothing! Absolutely nothing! I simply don't care!' Meanwhile she was writing on. Her trained hand did that, mechanically. At least they weren't watching her. They were watching Stromberg. All but Mr. Carlock. She looked up once, and caught his eyes on her.

'What did you do then?' Carlock pressed on.

'I went up to bed.'

'You heard or saw nothing that might throw any direct light on the murder?'

'Nothing. I didn't dream of such a thing.'

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But this morning, after breakfast . . . if I may go on . . .'

'Do.'

'Well, after breakfast I went out into the hall to get my pipe from my overcoat pocket. I felt something bulging in the skirt of the coat. I couldn't think what it might be. It was away down inside the lining. I felt in the side pockets. You see, I couldn't imagine how it could have got down in there. There were no holes or tears that I knew of in the lining. Even then I didn't think of Dane. Really, I hardly remembered the experience of the night. It was like a confused dream. But I felt in the breast pocket and found that it had no bottom. It had been cut. I reached down inside and felt a curious object. I couldn't make out what it was until I drew it partly out and saw that it was the Manchu cap. I found myself completely bewildered. Then I grew very angry. If I had met Dane at that moment I should certainly have struck him. I took the coat upstairs to my room. I couldn't make the thing out at all. Why Dane should go to the trouble of stealing the cap only to hide it in my coat was and is a mystery to me. No small part of my be-

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wilderment was due to the fact that it was difficult to imagine Dane doing such a thing. I'd never dreamed he was that sort. He is, or had seemed to me, an attractive and decent person. Certainly a most plausible person. Oh, of course, I'd observed certain things . . . little things . . . but . . .'

'What little things?'

'Well, really . . .'

'Having gone this far, Mr. Stromberg, I'm sure you will readily see the importance — to yourself, if to no one else — of coming clean. If you are thinking of sparing the feelings of others, let me advise you that we are far past such a point. We must have every ascertainable fact, every fact, no matter where it may lead.'

'Well, of course Dane has been living in the house for a week. He is known to be attractive to women. Well . . .'

'You imply that a woman is involved in this. What woman?'

'Oh, not in this. I know of no connection. But . . .'

'But what? We have no time to waste, Mr. Stromberg.'

'Well, I think that all of us in the house had

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noticed that something was going on between Dane and . . . well, Mrs. Cuppy. Something had been going on, before we arrived. It was very noticeable.'

'An affair, you mean?'

'I had no means of knowing how far it had progressed. It was simply noticeable. Miss Eames saw it right away and spoke of it to me. Mr. Ettlethwaite mentioned it in a way suggesting that he took it as a matter of course. Others hinted and smiled over it.'

'I see. But you have found nothing in that which might tend to explain why Dane should steal the cap and hide it in your coat?'

'As to that, sir, I must confess myself completely baffled.'

'What did you do when you took the coat up to your room this morning?'

'Well, I have admitted that I was extremely angry. I knew then, of course, of the murder. I was horrified at the thought that Dane should play such a ghastly trick on me. At the moment, in my anger, it seemed simply an issue between myself and him, whatever he might have been up to. I knew that he was downstairs. I went in

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through the bathroom we use in common to his room and put the cap in the closet there, behind a spare blanket. If you have not already searched the room you will find it there. Unless he has moved it. It was wrong of me, of course. But he had planted it on me. I planted it back on him. To get even, I suppose.'

'Not an unnatural impulse, of course. What did you do next?'

'I came back downstairs.'

'Where is the pipe you got from the coat?'

'Here.' He produced it from a side pocket.

'Why had you left the pipe in your overcoat?'

'Because I had smoked it while driving out from New York. Naturally I didn't smoke it at the party last night.'

'I see. Where is the overcoat now?'

'In my room. At least, I left it there.'

Carlock turned to the policeman. 'Go up to Mr. Stromberg's room,' he said, 'and bring his overcoat down. Don't go through the hall. Go through the den and use the back stairs.'

The officer went into the den and closed the door.

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‘Now, Mr. Stromberg, why didn’t you tell this story in the first place?’

‘I hardly know. I was still angry and very confused. I simply couldn’t think clearly. The implications were more than I could comprehend. At the moment, I felt a horror of possibly throwing suspicion on Mrs. Cuppy. And even then I couldn’t face the possibility of John Dane being implicated in a murder. Probably, too, I shrank from becoming entangled myself. I’ll admit that. It looked like a very difficult sort of thing to explain. Since morning, however, I’ve cleared it up in my own mind. I realized perfectly that my course this morning was not the right one. But now I have no business considering myself. I place myself entirely in your hands, gentlemen.’

‘You are willing to sign and make oath to the truth of the statement you now make?’

‘Certainly. I will do anything that may help to clear up this dreadful business.’

‘Thank you. Now as to your own relations with Mr. and Mrs. Cuppy. Have they always been pleasant?’

‘Oh, perfectly. Why, they were my greatest benefactors. To them I owe everything.’

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The officer returned at this point with the overcoat. Stromberg exhibited the cut pocket, and all gravely examined it as if they'd never seen it before.

After that, Stromberg was excused.

9

The Coroner looked at the Chief. Both inclined their heads.

'We'll arrest Dane,' said the Chief. 'Hang on to him this time. And lock up Stromberg and Mrs. Cuppy as material witnesses.'

'Just a moment on that,' said Carlock, 'if you don't mind, Chief. We've got them all here. They can't get away. What can we possibly gain by showing our hand?'

The Coroner removed his cigar, spat toward the fireplace, and spoke. 'Funny he'd force that drawer. He was the one that knew how it opened.'

The Chief glanced at him, and snapped out, 'Cover. He's just the one that would.'

Atkinson, who still wore an angry expression, asked, leaning toward Carlock with an air of rather ostentatiously ignoring the Chief, 'Any report yet on finger prints?'

'I've talked with Lieutenant Estivier over

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the phone,' replied Carlock. 'He seems to think it's going to be pretty difficult.'

'Why?'

'He has found too many. Dane's, I suppose — he must have left them when he opened the drawer for Miss Penn. Probably hers too. Perhaps Mr. Cuppy's. And more, I gather. It wasn't cleaned or dusted this morning, of course. Likely as not the man who forced the drawer wore gloves. He would have, unless he was an utter fool. Or even wrapped his handkerchief around his hand.'

'How about the hatchet?'

'That didn't go in town until later. I have no report on it.'

Dr. Obry, at this point, entered the room from the den. His appearance gave Elsie a start. She hadn't seen or heard him leave the room. So deeply, so terribly, had Stromberg's story absorbed her.

'I think we may talk with Mrs. Cuppy now,' said the Doctor. 'But it seems to me my duty, as her physician, to warn you again that unless the interview is conducted with the greatest consideration I cannot be answerable for the consequences. Mrs.

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Cuppy lies at the threshold of utter prostration. Naturally the shock of this murder has been a crushing one. Realizing that you might find it necessary to question her I have felt I had no right to give her an opiate or any drug that would stupefy her. As a result, while she has drowsed a little during the morning, her brain is still abnormally active. She is far from herself. But we may as well get it over with. I must urge on you, however, the importance of sparing her as much as possible. If, that is, her feelings and her extremely nervous condition are to be considered. It is quite necessary that I should be present. It would be much the best thing if only one other accompany me. I am sure, with Miss Penn taking down her statement word for word, you will all have the picture.'

The Chief, without a trace of expression on his big, blocked-in face, rose deliberately to his feet. 'I will go,' he said.

Instantly Atkinson sprang up. 'I must insist!' he cried. 'As the only representative here of the District Attorney's office, it is my duty.'

Then the Coroner got up, without a word. Plainly, he meant to be present.

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Carlock rose last, gathering up some notes he had been jotting down. 'I'm sorry, Doctor,' said he, 'but it looks as if we'd all have to go. I'm sure, however, that every effort will be made to handle it quietly.'

Dr. Obry spread his hands in submission. He looked slowly from man to man. But the Law had spoken. He was helpless.

'We'll take the back stairs,' said the Chief; and led the way into the den, clumping heavily in his thick-soled boots. You saw that he wouldn't know what it meant to show consideration for anybody. The four others trod lightly.

Elsie went out into the hall. She wasn't going through that den.

They were still playing bridge in the living-room. And the Gargoyle's violin still throbbed like a doom. She ran up the stairs.

She heard a step. This as she reached the landing, exactly at the spot where, in the morning, she had encountered Stromberg carrying his overcoat. She looked up. It was John Dane, coming down. She decided, in a crazy flutter, not to speak. Simply to rush by. But instead, she stood motionless. Her knees were almost giving way. And her cheeks

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flamed. She caught at the railing. She felt all soft inside. She'd be crying if she didn't watch out. Mustn't do that. Those men . . .

Dane stopped. She heard his low voice. She couldn't look at him — simply couldn't — but his voice sounded tired. Did he know or suspect the sinister web that was weaving round him? Pity surged in her breast. 'Just one thing.' This was what he was saying. 'Just this one thing. Please give me your home address.'

'I live with my aunt.' She said that. It wasn't an answer, of course.

'Where? I must know! Where?'

She simply couldn't speak. Couldn't frame another word. Her body sagged. With an effort she ran weakly on up the stairs. At the top she faltered, and with fumbling hands dabbed some powder on her face. Then, with another effort, pulled herself together and went along the hall to where those five men were standing in a silent group. The thing to do was, at the first moment possible, to escape. Get out of the house, off the place, away from this swamp-like air. Here you could hardly breathe. It was a spell that

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wove hideous dreams into your waking thoughts. Once back in the city she'd shake it all off. John Dane, too. All of them. 'Why,' she thought, impatiently, 'I don't even know the man! Don't know a thing about him.'

Dr. Obry was waiting to take her into the secret place he had prepared for her. But before she tiptoed into that adjoining room she saw a policeman come up the hall and hand the Chief a folded paper; saw him open it, look it over in his wooden way, and put it into an inside pocket of his coat.

The physician left her. Went back to the hall. She slipped noiselessly into the chair that had been placed in a doorway behind a screen. She could hear Mrs. Cuppy turning restlessly in bed and breathing hard. A woman's voice made a soothing remark; the nurse, doubtless. Then the door in the sick-room opened, and the five men filed in and took chairs, the Chief clumping heavily. She could see them as they came in. And when they were seated she could see Dr. Obry, Mr. Carlock, Chief Urquhart and the Coroner. Mr. Atkinson was hidden by the screen.

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Mrs. Cuppy was crying now; sobbing in an uncomfortably spasmodic way, very low.

10

Elsie, still trembling, held her pencil poised. 'After all,' she told herself, 'it's a lot better to be kept busy, even in this awful business, than to sit helplessly about like those others downstairs.'

What were they waiting for? The hush was painful. It seemed to run with a prickling sensation along your nerves. She heard that Coroner clear his throat. The woman in the bed turned and sobbed.

Then Carlock spoke. In a kindly, low voice. There was something of the gentleman in that State police official.

'We are extremely sorry to disturb you, Mrs. Cuppy. I assure you we will be as brief as we can. But there are a few questions we must ask.' The sobbing swelled out a little louder. There was a distinct touch of hysteria in it. Curious, in a way. You could understand sorrow, the crushing hand of tragedy. But this was an ungoverned woman. Beside herself. Surely she hadn't loved that hulk of a husband so intensely. Why, she

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couldn't have! Carlock pressed on, quietly enough, but firmly. 'Will you try, please, to tell us when and how you came into possession of the Chinese cap?'

Mrs. Cuppy was slow to answer. She made one or two false starts, still weeping uncontrollably. But finally she cried out, 'I don't know! My . . . my husband gave it to me!'

The voice had none of the rippling, cooing quality that Elsie had noted in it at their first meeting. It was a broken, shaky voice, hoarse from the paroxysms to which she had been surrendering herself.

Now, abruptly, she screamed, 'Where is my secretary? Why hasn't she come to me? She's a sly girl! She stole that cap!'

'We have the cap, Mrs. Cuppy,' explained Carlock. 'But we must learn how it came into your husband's possession. Do you know? Try to think clearly.'

'Oh . . . how can I . . . he bought it.'

'Can you tell us from whom he bought it?'

'I? How should I know?'

'Did he bring it out from New York?'

The woman merely sobbed.

'It was a common thing, was it not, for the

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Chinese merchants to come out here to show their wares to Mr. Cuppy?’

Another outburst of grief. Then, ‘Yes! Oh, yes! Of course!’

‘Was the cap brought out here in that manner, by one of the regular merchants? By a man with whom he was in the habit of having dealings?’

‘I think so. How should I know? I wasn’t there, I tell you.’ Then, a thought more steadily, ‘He bought it for a surprise for me. I wasn’t there.’

‘He told you nothing about that side of the transaction?’

‘No! No!’

‘He didn’t tell you how he bought it, or from whom?’

‘I tell you, no!’

‘And he didn’t mention how much he paid for it?’

‘Of course he didn’t! It was a present!’

‘Then you know nothing whatever of the transaction?’

‘Haven’t I told you I don’t? Why do you ask me these questions? Why do you come in here like this?’

‘I’m sorry, Mrs. Cuppy. I’m sure we all

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are. But it is our duty to ascertain the facts. Now will you tell us, please, exactly what you did with the cap last night, before you went upstairs?’

‘I don’t know what I did! I will not be questioned like this! Who are all these men, Doctor? Why did you bring them into my room? Send them out!’

‘They are all officers of the law, Mrs. Cuppy.’ Thus Dr. Obry. ‘I’m afraid I have no power to send them out.’

‘Just a minute.’ This was the Chief, speaking for the first time, in a hard, raspy voice. ‘You don’t remember asking Miss Penn to take care of the cap?’

The sobs began again.

‘Answer me! You had been drinking, had you not?’

Elsie, startled, looked up. The Chief was leaning forward, his stony eyes fixed on the wailing woman behind the screen. Carlock was watching him, his lips compressed.

‘He’s torturing her,’ thought Elsie. ‘How awful!’

‘Really,’ Dr. Obry put in, ‘I doubt if it will be of any use to . . .’

‘Be quiet!’ The Chief’s voice suddenly

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took on body and force. 'Isn't it the fact, Mrs. Cuppy, that by that time in the evening you were too drunk to know what you did or didn't do?'

Elsie, horrified, looked up again and saw Dr. Obry's shoulders twitch in a sort of shiver. But he merely clasped his hands tightly on his knees and stared down at them. He was, as he had intimated, helpless.

The Chief drove remorselessly on. Elsie thought fantastically of a grim gray warship stripped for deadly action. 'Tell me this, Mrs. Cuppy, were your relations with your husband pleasant or otherwise?'

Dr. Obry's shoulders twitched again. But he didn't lift his heavy eyes.

The sobs swelled into a sound not far removed from screaming. But the Chief raised that big voice of his. 'You are perfectly able to answer me. These hysterics aren't going to get you anywhere. Not anywhere at all. I'm going to stay right here until you make up your mind to drop this nonsense. Answer me! Now or later!'

A chair moved. There was a step. Atkinson appeared within Elsie's range of vision, standing over the Chief, sternly.

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'This can be done at some other time,' he said tartly.

The Chief ignored him. 'Mrs. Cuppy, did you love your husband?'

There was a breathless hush. Dr. Obry, looking up now, at last, stared unhappily. The sobbing and sniffing started up again. And she wailed, 'Oh, yes! He was the dearest, the most generous man that ever lived! We were utterly happy together! He lived only for me and I only for him!'

'How long have you had John Dane here?'

Another hush. Then a sudden scream that froze Elsie's blood. And a rustling sound, as if the woman were sitting up in bed. And a queer soft pounding. Was she beating a pillow? 'Is that man still in my house? Throw him out! I won't have him here!'

'And why won't you have him here?' the Chief thundered.

'He's a monster! He had pursued me! I had to tell my husband! He gave me no peace! He tried to compromise me! He outraged my hospitality! My husband ordered him to leave the house this morning! Why is he still here? I won't have him here! Throw him out!'

This was screamed out incoherently, broken with sobs and hysterical quick intakes of breath. Then more screaming, and that frantic pounding sound. And Elsie wrote it down. Or her hand did.

‘So you loved your husband dearly?’

‘Oh, yes! Yes! Always!’

‘And John Dane annoyed you?’

‘He did, I tell you! He did! He did!’

‘And you didn’t respond to his advances?’

‘How dare you suggest such a thing!’

‘Wait just a minute now! Wait just a minute!’ Deliberately the Chief drew that folded paper from the inside breast pocket of his coat. Spread it open on his big knees. Quite as deliberately removed a pair of spectacles from their case and put them on. Atkinson was still standing over him — in an almost threatening manner — and he had to look out around the thinner figure of the assistant District Attorney to glare (over his glasses) at the woman.

‘If you weren’t inclined to respond to John Dane’s advances then why did you write him this note?’

‘I never wrote him a note! Never! Never! Never!’

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‘You not only wrote it, but you weren’t so drunk but what you had a pretty good memory of it this morning. That’s why you’re staging this dramatic scene. Thought you could throw us off the scent by accusing Dane, did you? . . . You wait a minute, now. I’m going to read it to you. You listen to me! Sooner or later you’ll listen! Here, now, is the cool little note you wrote last night to the man you despise — “John you darling” . . .’

There was a sudden scraping of chairs. All the men sprang up excepting the Chief. He sat motionless, with the faintest imaginable flicker of a smile on the wooden face. . . . ‘She has fainted!’ Dr. Obry’s voice. ‘Lower her head! Quick!’

‘I wouldn’t worry, gentlemen.’ The Chief, dryly. ‘She’ll come round when she’s made her point. After all, we’re in no great hurry. Let her play her scene out.’

Atkinson came back at him. ‘If I were you,’ he said, in a suppressed voice, ‘I’d watch my step. You can’t get away with this third-degree stuff. Not with people like the Cuppys. You’ll find yourself in some pretty damned hot water first thing you

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know. But then' — he spread his hands — 'you've spilled the beans already.'

The Chief looked up at him now. 'I'll take care of the beans, Atkinson. And I'm not asking your advice. I've got her. Got her cold . . . There! See? She heard me. Really, gentlemen, you better just lay her on the bed. And you just sit down. I'm going to read you this letter. Don't worry about her. She'll hear it, all right. She'll hear it.'

He readjusted his spectacles and turned the paper toward the window. '“John you darling — Come to my room to-night. It's perfectly safe — Old Cuppy'll be snoring his stupid head off downstairs — I'll leave my door ajar — oh, I'm crazy about you — Crazy — Crazy — Crazy — Hazel” . . . It's just scrawled, you see, in pencil. Must have scribbled it the minute she got upstairs. And either took it or sent it to his room, for that's where we found it. And it's all here. The paper Dane burned must 'a' been just the envelope. Then he likely thought that was going to look pretty messy so he just tears up the note, very small. But we got it. And it's all here.'

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Through all this there was not a sound from the bed.

'Well,' said Atkinson acidly, in that same suppressed voice. 'I've warned you. You can't handle rich and influential people the way you'd handle a bum off the street. Likely it'll cost you your job. Anyhow, it's not our business, this stuff. Even if there was a little of this sort of thing going on. Rich people do these things. You can't do anything about that. It may mean something and it may not, but for God's sake . . .'

'Not our business? Then what is our business?'

'To find the murderer or murderers of Jonas Cuppy.'

'The murderers of Jonas Cuppy are in this house.' Impressively he said that. And complacently. Suddenly then, with an agility astonishing in so large a man, he sprang up and pointed at the bed.

'There!' he thundered. 'See that? She moved! She's heard every word of it!'

The silence that followed this bellow came upon them like a stunning force. Elsie pressed a hand to her breast, struggling to breathe.

From the bed came a faint whimpering.

IV

II

THE five men filed out into the hall. Mrs. Cuppy was whimpering on. The nurse stepped methodically about the room, moving chairs.

The door behind Elsie opened, slowly and very softly. She turned with a start of something near panic. Luckily she made no sound. Funny, her hand was pressing, almost painfully, against her breast. And her toes were curled tightly within her shoes.

It was Mr. Carlock. Uncertainly Elsie smiled. Might as well smile. He was beckoning. Very carefully she slipped out. And in that same cautious way he shut the door. The other men must have gone directly back downstairs; they were not in this upper hall. She walked with Mr. Carlock toward the stairs. It was odd, but the situation had taken on so intense an air of drama that it had begun to recede a little way (but a very definite way) from reality. It might almost have been framed within the proscenium of a theatri-

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cal stage. Certainly, at the present moment, moving slowly along the hall with this very quiet-spoken Mr. Carlock, she didn't feel as if she had the slightest personal part in the tragic mess. She might have been sitting in an orchestra chair looking on. Pretty soon the act curtain would drop, and she would stroll out to the foyer and chat with friends. 'I suppose,' she thought, 'I'm fed up. Something snaps then, somewhere in your nervous system, and you just automatically relax.'

Then a thought she hadn't known she was entertaining flashed out in indignant words that were real enough for anybody. She stopped short. 'Mr. Carlock, Mrs. Cuppy said she didn't know anything about how the cap came here.'

He stopped, too, and fixed his thoughtful eyes on her. 'Yes, she said that. Isn't it true?'

'Certainly not.'

'How do you know?'

'She told me. Told me all about it. Listen! I can give you almost her exact words. It was that first evening . . . when was that? . . . last night? Funny, it seems years ago.' She didn't know she had caught Mr. Carlock's

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sleeve tightly in her fingers. 'She said this . . . I was looking at the cap, you see; she had it on . . . she said — "You know, my dear, it didn't come to us through the regular channels. Two strange Chinamen drove out here one evening in a flivver. Imagine!" . . . She said just that. And then, "They had the cap wrapped up in a newspaper. And my husband tells me he bought it for a song. He is still chuckling over it. Some strange dark story there. Most fascinating." And this — "It would bring not far from a quarter of a million at auction. And I'm sure my husband didn't pay twenty-five thousand." . . . You see, she knew perfectly well that it was stolen. Oh, do you think those thieves might have . . . have committed the murder?'

'Not likely.' How cool he was. And how quietly impersonal. Now she saw her hand on his sleeve and removed it. 'You see, they got their money. They'd hardly stick around here. For one thing, they'd be afraid of those other Chinese, the war party. Their lives wouldn't be worth three cents. Most likely they're in Mexico by now.'

'But why shouldn't Mrs. Cuppy tell the truth?'

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'She knows how valuable the cap is. As stolen property it would have to be returned to Ting Pao.'

'She didn't act last night as if she cared about it. The way she was throwing it around. She even gave it to me. Actually!'

'She wasn't sober then.'

'Oh! No. That's true.'

They were going on down the broad stairway when they heard some one running down after them. Carlock turned. It was John Dane. She saw that he carried a letter. And she saw somber eyes in a white face. Then her own eyes fell.

'I beg pardon, sir,' he said. There was an intent, almost burning note in his voice. 'I have written a note to Miss Penn. Have you any objections to my giving it to her?'

'Certainly not, Mr. Dane.'

Again she felt that softness within. And again, she knew, the revelatory color was flaming hotly in her cheeks. She appeared to have simply no defense against the emotional appeal of this man . . . 'John you darling!' So Mrs. Cuppy had written. A wild new sort of anger surged in her breast. She couldn't speak. Yet it was all she could do

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to keep still. For a cent, right in front of this police officer, she'd turn on John Dane and give him a piece of her mind . . . But she mustn't . . . Not a word. . . . Hotly she decided she wouldn't touch that note. Wouldn't have anything to do with such a man. He was nothing to her. Nothing. If she could only get away. Only have a chance to think . . . to breathe. . . . She took the note. It shook in her hand. And then John Dane ran on down the stairs and disappeared within the living room.

Vaguely (her tired confused brain was racing so crazily) she knew that Mr. Carlock led her down and around behind the stairs and into the den. She couldn't very well refuse to go in there. Anyway he couldn't make her look down at the rug where that awful . . . she shivered.

He was speaking. 'I'm going to ask you to read that note, Miss Penn.'

Fumblingly she tore the envelope. Her eyes were filling, making it difficult to see clearly. She found her handkerchief, and somehow read:

'This I must say to you. You have every

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right to think me a trifle. I am not. You enchanted me last night. To-day, without that costume and make-up, as your honest little self, you have enchanted me even more. I don't know about love at first sight. Perhaps that's just rot. I simply don't know. I'm all mixed up. I do know that you are honest and real and simple and adorable. One doesn't find so many real people nowadays. And I know you're not the sort to be let loose in this ugly world. I know this, too — I've got to square myself for the way I seem to have begun with you. Won't you give me that chance? Oh, I'm head over heels in love with you! You wouldn't give me your address. But I'll find you — somehow — the minute we get out of this frightful mess. And I'll show you — I've simply got to find a way to show you — that I'm decent. I've got to have a chance. Maybe the police will give me your address. They're friendly enough with me now, thank God! Overnight I've come to realize this — that I'm going to put up a fight for you. I've got to. We're the same sort. Why, good God, we can't be together two minutes without flaming up! It must mean something.

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‘Oh, I know this is just a crazy, incoherent note. For God’s sake, let me know where I can find you! I will find you! I *will*!’

‘And anyhow, it’s a relief just to write this. I’d rather write it than say it. I want to be put on record. I want to be tied. I don’t know what love is — it’s a lot of different things, I suppose, with different people — but whatever it is, I’ve got it. And I’m going to win you if I can. But first I’ve got to win your respect. That’s my job now. I must.

JOHN DANE’

To Miss Elsie Penn.

She was crying. She moved to a window.

Mr. Carlock spoke. ‘It is my duty to ask you, Miss Penn, if there is anything in that letter that might bear on the case.’

She couldn’t answer; could only twist the paper in her hands.

‘Your own position, I’m sure you realize, is rather delicate. If it were found that you were in private communication with any of the guests in the house I’m afraid you’d find yourself in pretty serious trouble.’

She thrust out the crumpled note. He took it and read it.

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That phrase about the police blazed in her brain . . . 'They're friendly enough with me now, thank God!' . . . He knew nothing of his present terrible danger. Chief Urquhart came to mind — strong, stony, implacable, rushing like a beast of prey to the kill. She saw again his complacent grin when he'd read his own name in the headlines. She couldn't so much as pass a friendly warning. Not a word.

Mr. Carlock returned the note. She stood, every nerve in her body taut as a bow-string, folding and refolding the paper into a compact little square.

She shivered again. A thin querulous voice that appeared to be her own remarked, 'It's getting cold.'

'I'm afraid,' said Mr. Carlock, glancing out at the long late-afternoon shadows, 'that nobody's thinking about heating the house.'

'If you don't mind' — her own voice again — 'I'll run up and get my coat.'

'I'll come with you,' said he.

So! She, too, was to be watched. The thought hurt. She wouldn't so much as speak to John Dane. Or would she? How could she tell what she might do? They went up

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the back stairs together. Mr. Carlock stood at the door while she was in her room. She got her coat from the closet and slipped it on. She put the note in a capacious side pocket of the coat; then drew it out again and kissed it passionately. But she caught herself. 'No sense in blubbering like a baby,' she thought; and rejoined Mr. Carlock. Together they went down. And all the way her hand, deep in that pocket of her coat, clutched John Dane's wadded note.

Mr. Carlock spoke of it, on the stairs. 'Shall you be sending him any reply, Miss Penn?'

She was flushing again. She'd simply have to get hold of herself, somehow. She must speak quietly. But she couldn't. Her voice broke out hotly, 'Certainly not! Why, I don't even know the man!'

'If you should,' said Carlock, in his grave, even voice, 'I must warn you to be extremely careful.'

That angered her. What was he, after all, but another of those policemen!

In the Chinese room the other officials were in their chairs about the table. Dr. Obry sat with his head in his hands. Once,

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when he lifted it, she saw that he looked gray and old. Chief Urquhart sat firmly, massively upright, like a wooden idol. Mr. Atkinson was speaking angrily . . . 'So you're dopping it out as another Snyder case. Well, you're wrong. It's not so simple as that. Not by a damn sight!'

The Chief didn't so much as look at him. He sputtered on for a moment or two, then sat back sullenly.

The Coroner spat on the rug.

Mr. Carlock, slipping quietly into his chair, reached for paper and pencil to jot down a few brief notes. Two beams of yellow light streamed through the western windows and illuminated the cabinets against the opposite wall. The policeman called Mike walked over and raised the blinds. His heavy step was the only sound. Elsie's gaze roved, nervously alert, about the treasure-house of a room. Those beams of amber sunlight, alive with millions upon millions of dust-motes, gilded the ivory carvings, glinted upon the figurines in rock crystal, lighted prettily the green and rose and tawny and creamy mutton-fat jades. On a carved and lacquered green table, over in the corner by the fireplace, lay the pearl

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cap, still casually rolled up in that bit of newspaper. Nobody, passing through the room and glancing at it, would give it a second thought.

Faintly, beyond the closed door and the hall, came the throbbing sound of a violin, playing eerie, monotonous strains with hardly a trace of what a policeman or an assistant district attorney or a coroner could be expected to recognize as a tune. The sustained tones fell unpleasantly on Elsie's nerves. She shivered. And then she saw that Mr. Atkinson was twisting in his chair and tapping with his long fingers.

Mr. Carlock spoke. At the first sound of his quiet voice, all started as if he had broken a spell. 'Dr. Obry,' he said, 'you examined the body, of course.'

The physician, roused out of his painful, bewildered reverie, lifted his head and replied with a simple 'Yes.'

'At what hour would you put Mr. Cuppy's death?'

'Well' — Dr. Obry cleared his throat — 'It must have been about a quarter past nine this morning when I first saw the body. At that time he couldn't possibly have been

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dead more than four or five hours. Everything considered, I would put it not earlier than between four and five o'clock.'

'Could he have lived for any time after the attack?'

'With his head crushed in like that? Hardly. No, death must have been very nearly instantaneous.'

'You would fix the moment of death, then, positively, as later than four o'clock?'

'Yes.'

'Thank you.'

The violin drew nearer. Just outside, in the hall. Throbbing on. Suddenly the jumpy Mr. Atkinson banged a fist on the table and cried out, 'Stop that noise! Officer! You! Tell that bird if he doesn't lay off I'll break his damn fiddle over his bald head!'

Mike stepped out into the hall. Abruptly the music stopped. Voices sounded near the closed door. Angry voices. Then, as abruptly, the violin began again, right outside the door; in a minor key, deep, penetrating; utterly mournful and musically aimless wanderings up and down the G-string; but much louder and with a more intensely vibrato throbbing.

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The policeman stepped quickly within and leaned against the door. That lugubrious, deep-toned wailing filled the room. To Chief Urquhart the officer addressed himself. 'Do you wish I should adopt rough methods, Chief? He says, "To hell with the District Attorney! What does he think he is" — he says — "a critic? Tell him we got one in the house already" — he says — "and that's too many!"'

That Gargoyle person was scraping off chords now, very loud chords, of a cacophonous modernistic sort. Atkinson sprang up, shoved the policeman aside, and flung the door open. There stood the queer little bald-headed musician with the long nose, scraping away, thrusting it upon them exactly as a naughty child might have done; grinning with an angry leer, his eyes staring and rolling. It wouldn't surprise you to see him stick out his tongue. Elsie's toes were again curling tightly within her shoes. There seemed to be, in the man's appearance as in his music, something deranged, something perversely, primitively violent, something almost maniacal. Perhaps he'd committed the murder. Why didn't they think of that?

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But Mr. Atkinson merely snatched the violin, thrust the sputtering musician away, slammed the door, and dropping the instrument on a chair resumed his seat, breathing heavily.

The Coroner muttered, 'Crazy as a bed-bug, that bird!' And spat.

And then Chief Urquhart announced, grimly, with one huge hand spread flat on the table, 'We're going into conference now. Dr. Obry, we'll excuse you if you don't mind. And you, Miss Penn.'

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Elsie walked along the hall with the Doctor. In the living-room those bridge players were still at it. Mr. Delos was playing Canfield; unaware, of course, all of them, of that dreadful scene in Mrs. Cuppy's room, as of the present grim conference. The actress still lay on the sofa, wearily, with Mr. Ettlethwaite still seated beside her. Talking about himself, of course. John Dane sat alone near the bay window. Stromberg lay sprawled in a big chair. So much she caught in a fluttering glance.

'You'd better lie down until you're needed,

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Miss Penn,' said Dr. Obry gently. 'Those brutes are putting you through a terrific experience.'

'I think I need air more,' she replied wanly. 'I couldn't sleep anyway.'

They walked out into the *porte cochère*. 'If I could only bring myself to realize what they're up to.'

'It is terrible, Miss Penn. You do see, of course . . .'

'Well, I . . .'

'Chief Urquhart has his case nearly built.' The Doctor's voice broke slightly. 'He's going to accuse John Dane and Mrs. Cuppy of the . . . the murder. Oh, it's unthinkable! Why, I've known Hazel from the moment she was born! Admitting that she is a spoiled child, that she is wilful, that she has done foolish things . . .'

'Oh, they didn't . . . they never . . . I can't believe . . .'

'I've known Jim Urquhart a long, long time, too, Miss Penn. He's crude and rough. Sometimes he's stupid. But he's stubborn. And he's strong. Can't you see that he's in complete command of the situation? Atkinson is a child in his hands. A reed. Just a

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young fellow with a political job. And believe me, there's politics enough in this county. Plenty of it. That Coroner's nothing but a hanger-on. Used to run a livery stable.'

'But Mr. Carlock, he's . . .'

'I've been watching for him to take hold. But he doesn't seem to. I can't make him out. As a lieutenant of the State Police he could really exert almost as much authority as he might choose. You see, he has the State behind him. And he is widely known as an expert in these cases. He and that sergeant of his work a lot with the District Attorney's office in the city. New York. George Carlock — the name even — carries weight. Authority. These local men usually feel that. But I can't make him out.'

'Mr. Urquhart' — Elsie broke out nervously with this — 'the Chief, he's working for himself!'

'Oh, yes.'

'He's after the publicity!'

'Yes. And he would be. Jim is ambitious politically. I know that. And it's the publicity I dread most.'

'You mean . . .'

'Don't you understand, Miss Penn, that

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this story is going to burst out in the papers to-morrow morning? Jim Urquhart will see to that. Trust him! And once the story breaks — Hazel and John Dane, her lover, accused of the most sensational, really the most important murder in years — rich, important people, all that — can't you see that once the story breaks they are ruined for life? The newspapers will simply crush Hazel. They'll hound her to death. I really think it will kill her. And as for Dane, where will he be? Whatever new developments may arise, his name won't be worth a snap of the fingers. He may as well go out to Tahiti and stay until he dies.'

Elsie whirled on him. 'Mr. Stromberg lied. He said it was two-twenty this morning when he saw Mr. . . . saw that . . .'

'Saw Dane in the hall?'

'Yes. He fixed it positively. Said he was up in his room at two-twenty-five. Yet you fixed the time of Mr. Cuppy's death, just as positively, at a time hours later.'

'Hm! That's so! Your mind is keener than mine, Miss Penn. I never thought of that. Why didn't you speak out?'

'Oh . . . I guess I was just too worn out.'

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Besides, Mr. Carlock got it. Why else did he ask you those questions?’

‘Even so, Stromberg’s story will land with terrific force on a jury, I’m afraid. He tells it convincingly.’

‘Oh, why doesn’t Mr. Carlock *do* something!’

‘I wish I knew, Miss Penn. As I tell you, I can’t make that man out. Well’ — the Doctor sighed, and then brushed off, with a tired hand, a few beads of perspiration that had appeared on his temples — ‘well, I must go up to Hazel.’ He sighed again; stood a moment lost in his own tragic thoughts. ‘The awful thing about it’ — he was now like a man so unnerved that he talks aloud to himself — ‘the horrible thing is that Jim Urquhart can ruin Hazel . . . ruin them both . . . without even approaching a conviction. The newspapers will seize on the love affair, broadcast it, wallow in it. There’ll never be a chance to explain. Six truths can’t overtake one lie.’ Unsteadily he turned and entered the house.

Elsie, hardly knowing what she was about, descended the steps and crossed the road toward the Japanese garden. Twilight was

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settling, but there were no lights in the lantern posts of carved stone. There was nobody about the place now to attend to such matters.

She mounted the high-arching little bridge. Leaned on the railing and looked down at the dim, lazy goldfish; but as she bent her head her eyes filled, and she couldn't distinguish much of anything in the dimpling water. Her mind was a jumble of queerly confused memories. Her hand, deep in the pocket of her coat, clutched John Dane's note. That man couldn't have committed a murder. Nor was he a thief.

Those policemen, back in the house, were the law. All the law there was. Blundering on. Politics. Publicity. Primitive, ruthless men fighting one another to build reputation and success on a foundation of broken lives. It was disheartening.

She heard a car in the driveway and turned. A State policeman sat at the wheel. She could just make out the straps crossing over the shoulders and the cap. A small figure of a man appeared from the house and entered the car. Mr. Wong. They were letting him go, then. Driving him into the

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city, probably. They'd better. He wasn't out of danger. Pure intuition told her that. In a curious way she was sorry to see him go. He was one man you could believe.

She descended the farther slope of the bridge. Here was the stone bench where she and John Dane had sat. Twice. Her pulse raced crazily. Again she found herself pressing a hand to her breast — her free hand; the other, down in that coat pocket, still held the note. Extraordinary the blunt power in Dane's hastily scribbled words. They'd had the force of a blow when she read them. It was a love letter. In her thoughts those words stung and glowed. Oh, why wouldn't life let her alone! That was all she wanted (she thought) — to be let alone.

She hurried past the bench, following the winding path along the brook-side. The twilight deepened. The heaped-up rocks, which had been placed with an apparent carelessness that was subtly art, seemed in the dusk like miniature shadowy mountains. There were mosses and ferns. Twisted cedars grew there and deepened the shadows. The house was out of sight now. The path led to a tumbled-up boundary wall of rocks and

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there twisted off to the left. She stopped, looking about. She didn't want to go back by that bench. Perhaps if she followed the path it would lead her back another way.

'Do you want to make fifty dollars?'

Elsie caught her breath. That crazy pulse was pounding against her temples. A man's voice. From nowhere, apparently. Low and cautious. She looked; frightened, but with every faculty almost abnormally sharpened. Her eyes searched the leafy top of the wall. At last, in the deepest of the shadows, she glimpsed a face.

'Don't be alarmed. It's all right. I'm from the "Morning Earth." Here's a note for Mr. Delos. And here's a fifty-dollar bill. Will you take the note in to him? That's all I ask.'

A nightmarish feeling that she couldn't move had seized upon Elsie.

'Will you do it? Perfectly proper, really. Needn't involve you in the least. The local police are slipping everything to the "Planet." Getting good pay for it, too. It isn't on the level.'

That was probably true enough. But she wouldn't speak.

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‘Then look here, if you won’t take the note will you do this — tell him that if he can possibly get a story out here to me I can wait until half-past nine to-night. Until ten, as a last resort. Be right in this spot. Have a car waiting. Tell him it’s Andrews — Ben Andrews.’

Elsie found now that she could move. She turned and walked back. The voice died out.

By the stone bench she paused. Just stood there. If only she could think! But she couldn’t. Her mind was a tangle of indecisions and memories, of the horror that hung over the day, of hurt pride and jealousy, and of an unnerving pity for John Dane. His kisses were still on her lips. They’d just flamed up, the two of them. He’d said that. It was true. She’d flamed too. A sudden bitter hatred of Hazel Cuppy surged in her breast like a pang. She’d made love to him. He was an artist. Sensitive, of course. A man of temperament. Elsie was mothering him now. She couldn’t help it, however much it hurt. Even if he’d . . . whatever might have occurred . . . Oh, it was all that woman’s fault! And now she was crying again.

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She sat on that bench. A queer thing to do. But all at once she'd wanted to. Well, that was how it was!

Mistily she could see the dark shape of the house. It was lighted up within. Over the windows of the Chinese room, in the nearest corner, the blinds were drawn.

A man came over the bridge. Her nerves were on edge again. John Dane . . . No, that other State officer in citizen clothes; the one that had come with Mr. Carlock in the morning.

'Will you please come into the house, Miss Penn?' he said respectfully. 'Chief Urquhart wishes to see you.'

Funny, he knew precisely where to find her out here, in the dusk. Perhaps he'd happened to see her go into the garden.

Mr. Carlock sat at the telephone in the side hall; listening intently and jotting down notes on a pad. Elsie hurried by, and went on around the stairs into the main hall. Even before she reached the entrance to the living-room she heard voices . . . 'One spade' . . . 'Double' . . . 'Two spades' . . . 'Three hearts'

Lady Can Do

... 'Three spades' ... 'Four hearts' ...
'Double!' ... How *could* they?

A policeman in the hall let her go into the Chinese room. She quietly resumed her chair. At least none of these men could suspect what was going on inside her head. Oh, perhaps Mr. Carlock ... But what of it! She felt defiant.

Chief Urquhart stood by the fireplace, talking in low tones with the Sergeant. Elsie looked over her pencils. All needed sharpening. And her notebook was nearly full. She picked up another and broke the back so it would lie flat.

Mr. Carlock came in and dropped his notes of the telephone conversation on the table. After a moment the Chief returned to his chair.

'That was New York headquarters,' said Mr. Carlock. 'They've got a bit of news. Five of the Chinese servants have given themselves up.'

'Is that all of them?' asked Mr. Atkinson.

'All but one. The butler, Sin, seems not to be among them.'

The Chief asked crisply, 'What's the story?'

'Their story, the servants', is that when

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they came downstairs this morning they couldn't find the man Sin. And he wasn't in his room. I gather that they were in some confusion over that. Sin was in the habit of giving them their orders for the day. Then the boy whose duty it was to clean up in the front part of the house discovered Mr. Cuppy's body in the den. After that they all ran away. Simply in a panic. Very much as Mr. Wong suggested. They say that they walked across country to Jamaica, caught a train to New York, and hid in the basement of a curio dealer on Pell Street. This afternoon they decided to surrender themselves.'

'And you believe that?' asked Atkinson, with a sneer.

Carlock shrugged. 'For the present. It is common experience that this sort of Chinaman, the regular domestic servant, is truthful and faithful.'

'Even so, where is that butler . . . Sin? No, it's fishy.'

'At the moment I haven't a notion where Sin is,' said Carlock. 'He may be hiding. He may be dead.'

'Oh, then you believe in him, too!' Atkinson.

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'I'm inclined to. Mr. Wong recommended him to Mr. Cuppy. I have not been able to pick up the slightest bit of color against him. What little data I have would appear to make him out a particularly steady and honest sort.'

Atkinson kept at him, 'And you trust this man Wong?'

Carlock looked steadily at the Assistant District Attorney. When he was ready he replied with the single word, 'Perfectly.'

Atkinson snorted. Lit a cigarette. With a beaten-back expression fell to scribbling notes.

Chief Urquhart brought down his big hand on the table. 'All this is beside the point, gentlemen. We've got some real evidence before us. And we know where we're going.' He moved his chair back and around, turning his massive front directly toward Elsie and taking her in with a firmly fixed gaze.

Elsie's wits fluttered. So it was, at last, her turn. She thought . . . she was still, it is to be noted, in that confused phase . . . 'What's he up to now?' She tried to meet those cold eyes but couldn't quite. Nervelessly she

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fingered the pencils before her; twisting them about, then laying them side by side in a neat row. Not before, even during the scene in Mrs. Cuppy's room, had she felt the full strength of the man. At least it hadn't then come to her as a personal experience. The wheedling tone, that rather disgusting suggestion of the man-and-woman business, was gone. No foolishness now. He meant business. She could think of nothing but an enormous, tireless bulldog.

'Miss Penn,' he began, in deliberately measured words (Oh, those eyes!), 'you told us this morning of a talk you had with John Dane in the garden. I want you now to go back over all that. He was out there with you about twenty minutes, you said. A good deal can be said in twenty minutes. I want you to straighten it out in your mind and tell us everything he said. Everything.'

Elsie sat motionless. If only she could *think!* As it stood, she couldn't. Not yet. . . . Was there anything she'd kept back? The very thought suggested that there was.

'What was the first remark he made?' pressed the Chief.

'Well, he . . . oh, he came wandering out

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there. I was sitting on a bench. He asked if there was room for another stray. I moved over on the bench and he sat down.'

'Then what was said?'

'Well, I . . . oh, something, just talk . . .'

'What talk?'

'I think I made some remark about it's being beautiful there in the garden.'

'What reply did he make to that?'

'Well . . . if I can recall it . . . oh, yes, he lifted his head up and sniffed the air and said something like — "If only it didn't smell of oil."'

'Oh, he said that?'

'Yes, sir.'

Elsie was doing pretty well, she felt. Talking evenly enough. Only Mr. Carlock knew that the Chief was beginning to torture her almost as savagely as he had tortured that wretched woman upstairs. Then and there she made up her mind that not one of those others should so much as glimpse the truth. Whatever the crazy truth might be. As for Mr. Carlock, let him think what he might. She couldn't help that. She saw clearly enough how closely he was watching her. But let him! There was nothing she could do

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about it. And the experience, whatever it might turn into, had to be lived through. Somehow.

‘Then what?’

‘I . . . I think I asked if the Cuppys were friends of his, and he replied that he’d never heard of their having any friends. I spoke of the guests in the house and he said that Mrs. Cuppy collected personalities and was always getting new lots and throwing them at each other. People lived off her, he said. Especially Mr. Stromberg. He said that he himself, I mean Mr. . . . Mr. Dane, didn’t come out of friendship but for five hundred dollars.’

‘What did he mean by that?’

‘The price of his services, he said. For doing that pastel portrait of Mrs. Cuppy. And that he was leaving in the morning.’ She was speaking more readily now. ‘Most of what followed after that I have already told you. He asked if I thought I could stick it out and all that. We talked a little about Mr. Cuppy then. I asked if he was always like that . . . I meant drunk . . . and he said, “More or less. Always pickled, if that’s what you mean. Oh, he doesn’t always pass out.”

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It was after that that he advised me not to try to stay.'

'Just how did he put it?'

'Oh, he . . . well, I remember his saying, "I'm afraid you're in wrong here." '

'Did he explain what he meant by that?'

'I don't think so. I don't remember. I'm really trying to tell you everything, but it isn't easy. To remember, I mean. I was pretty excited. I was dressed in a beautiful Chinese costume and my face was painted up and . . . and then I'd never been in a millionaire's house before and with famous people all around. I do remember that we talked a little about how you couldn't always choose your associations if you were working for a living.'

'Was anything personal said? About himself and yourself?'

'Oh, a little, I suppose.'

'Well . . . what?'

'Why, when we were talking about jobs, that way, I told him that I . . . that fortunately I was the mental type.'

'What did he say to that?'

'He said, as I recall it — "Mental type? My eye!" '

'He must have said more than that.'

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'Well, only that he'd watched me when we were in the house and that I was just a . . . a romantic girl.'

'Oh, he did!'

'Yes, sir.'

'Go on. What else did he say about that?'

'Oh, nothing much . . . I mean . . .'

'What did he *say*?'

Elsie was fighting back the color again. This terrible man kept at one so! 'Really, nothing much. You see, Mrs. Cuppy came just about then and . . .'

Mr. Atkinson broke in at this point. 'Miss Penn, you have been in our confidence all day. We have had a right to assume that you are an honest, straightforward young woman. But you are raising doubts in our minds. You are keeping something back.'

'Oh, no, Mr. Atkinson! Really! It's harder than you seem to realize to . . .'

'Oh, come!' boomed the Chief. 'We know all about that. Speak out!'

'Well, I remember his saying that he was romantic and willing to admit it. And then he said that I wasn't safe anywhere here. "Even with me!" ' Her voice had dropped almost to a whisper.

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‘So! He said you weren’t safe with him!’

‘Yes, sir.’ What on earth were they getting at?

‘Then what?’

‘Why, Mrs. Cuppy came.’

‘I see. And that is all?’

‘I . . . why . . . yes, I would say so.’

There was a long, tense silence. No one moved; and she could feel their eyes on her. The strain was pretty nearly unendurable.

Suddenly the Chief’s voice boomed out again. So suddenly that she jumped in her chair. A big voice with a merciless dry twang in it. ‘Now, Miss Penn, just one more question. When you were sitting on that bench with John Dane, discussing your romantic nature, did he make love to you?’

She couldn’t, at the moment, forestall a low, quick, gasping intake of breath. The room seemed full of eyes. She began to cry. For just an instant the perversely impish thought popped up that she hadn’t cried so much in one day since babyhood. What was the matter with her, anyway? Were her nerves just completely shot?

‘Answer me!’ thundered the Chief. ‘Did he, or didn’t he, make love to you?’

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'I . . . why . . . a little . . .'

'Speak up! Louder!'

'Why . . . a little . . . I . . .'

'Oh, he made love to you a little. Now just what do you mean by that?'

'I d-don't know.'

'You don't know? That's peculiar. Did he take you in his arms?'

'I don't know . . . I — guess so . . . I . . .'

'You guess so. Hmp! Then he did take you in his arms?'

'Y-yes.'

'I see. He took you in his arms. Did he kiss you?'

Elsie summed all that was left of her sadly scattered native sense and character. This man was, of course, simply breaking her down. A little healthy anger came unexpectedly to her aid.

'Did he kiss you?'

Elsie looked straight up at him, wiping her tears away, and said, firmly enough, 'Yes.'

'Very good! He kissed you. You permitted it?'

No answer. But she was still looking at him.

'You knew, at the time, of his affair with Mrs. Cuppy?'

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‘No! I did not!’

‘But he had told you, bluntly, that you weren’t safe with him. You made no attempt to leave when he said that?’

‘No.’

‘Very good. That is all, I think.’

The tension broke. A chair scraped. Carlock, who hadn’t uttered a word (in a confused way she felt a flicker of gratitude for that) set to work on those interminable notes of his. The Coroner spat and lit a fresh cigar. Elsie slumped back in her chair. She even felt a measure of relief. It might, after all, have been worse. There was nothing shameful in an honest kiss, whatever unpleasant construction might be put upon it by the vile minds of these men. She hated them all. Loathed them. Even, in a measure, Mr. Carlock. He might (she thought now) have stopped the odious probing. He hadn’t lifted a finger.

This was the moment, a grave but distinctly relaxed moment, that Chief Urquhart chose to whirl on her. Really to take her breath away. Speaking rapidly, in a sort of roar.

‘We have your word that you’ve told us all

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of it — everything that might bear, even remotely, on the case?’

He caught her in a moment of exhaustion, completely off her guard. She bit her lip. Looked about her in a sort of panic. A little color crept into her wan cheeks.

‘Ha! I see! You haven’t told us!’

‘Oh, but I . . .’

‘I see! All but a few really important little things that you’d just as soon we didn’t know about!’

‘Oh, no, Mr. Urquhart . . .’

‘Come out with it, then! He said something else. What was it?’

Elsie nerved herself. She was caught. Her small hands gripped the sides of her chair. She wouldn’t tell them an out-and-out lie. She couldn’t do that. Again she looked straight up at him. And now there was a glint of something like steel in hers. It is doubtful if the Chief saw it. She looked very tired, very frail.

‘Mr. Urquhart,’ she said, ‘it is really difficult to reconstruct a fairly long conversation. Especially if you had reason to be excited and confused at the time. Besides, I’ll admit that my emotions have been stirred. We can’t

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help these things. Of course, I haven't wanted to tell these intimate happenings. And I haven't wanted to tell things that might help you to build your outrageous trumped-up case against Mr. Dane.'

'You dare say that? You've been here, all day, completely in our confidence, hearing all the evidence and . . .'

'Yes, I dare say it.'

'So you've deliberately held out on me! Like a crook!'

'No.' Wearily she explained. 'Not deliberately. If you knew just a little about human nature you'd understand that people who feel deeply, people who are torn with emotions they can't understand, don't always think straight. I told you everything that came into my head this morning.' She sighed. 'But I suppose, with all of us, there are times when the heart keeps a good deal of what it knows from the head.'

'Are you trying to tell me I don't know my business?'

'I'm perfectly sure you don't.' (Was there, just for an instant, a faint twitch at one corner of Mr. Carlock's mouth?)

'Well, I'll be damned!' roared the Chief.

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And Elsie, more than a little beside herself now, flashed straight back at him with 'I'm perfectly sure you will.'

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Before he could sputter out a reply to that inspired thrust, Mr. Carlock took quick command. Indeed, for the first time all day he showed what he might be when he chose. 'Miss Penn,' he said briskly, 'just what was that one further remark of John Dane's?'

'It was after he warned me that I wasn't safe with him. The rest of it was — "If I weren't in such a ticklish situation here . . . the damndest mess, just to-night . . ." That was all. There was just a foolish word or two. Really nothing. Then he — kissed me. I heard somebody and made him stop. It was Mrs. Cuppy. You've had the rest.'

Her heart had known vaguely that this admission must damage John Dane in the eyes of these heavy-handed officials. But she hadn't thought it so important as it now seemed. The effect of the quietly uttered words was electrical. Even Chief Urquhart, who was still apoplectically purple about the

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neck, sat up with a jerk. Mr. Atkinson, convinced at last, stared. The Coroner dropped his cigar and had to pursue it, puffing hoarsely, about the rug.

'You're very sure that that was all, Miss Penn?' This from Mr. Atkinson, hot on the scent.

'Perfectly sure.'

'He gave you no inkling as to what lay back of the remark?'

'No.'

'You had then no notion as to what he meant?'

'No. Not then.'

'Later?'

'Yes. I know now.'

'Oh? You know now what he meant?'

'Certainly. Mrs. Cuppy was after him like a crazy woman. He was in a very embarrassing position. He couldn't quite slap her face. Just as he can't try to save himself now by attacking her character. A situation like that must be extremely difficult to a man who happens to be a gentleman. Mr. Stromberg, I presume, was an earlier lover of Mrs. Cuppy's, and that would be a complicating . . .'

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'And just why do you presume that?' snarled the Chief.

'Because she prefers to keep him in Tibet.' At this point she met Carlock's eyes full. There was understanding in those keen eyes. But also a hard aloofness. Even he wasn't a man to confide in.

The Chief banged the table. 'This is enough!' he bellowed. 'Young lady, we won't trouble you for any more of your opinions. We're here to deal with facts.'

Elsie promptly got up and went over to look at the marvelous carved jades in a wall cabinet.

'Better bring Dane right in here,' whispered the Coroner. 'Put him through the hoops. Sweat it out of him.'

'Not here,' said the Chief, more complacently.

'Why not?'

'Because the sergeant took him over, half an hour back, and put him right where he belongs.'

'Locked him up?'

'Sure. I've got him this time and got him good.'

Elsie's eyes widened, but she didn't look around.

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‘What’s more’ — still the Chief — ‘I’m going down there right now and give him the God-damndest riding he’s ever even heard of. Yes, sir! When I get through with that bird high hats’ll be worth about two for a nickel.’

Elsie stood rigid; but didn’t turn.

‘We’ll all go,’ said Carlock, in his brisker voice. Promptly then, full of it, they all gathered up hats and coats, stuffed their various collections of notes into their pockets, and left. A moment later she heard two cars drive off.

She walked quietly over and sank down into her chair. Thinking. In swift blinding flashes. That man Sin kept popping into her mind. He knew something. If he was alive. Mr. Wong would help. He’d be back in his New York home soon now. And there was the one they called Ting Pao. The pearl cap belonged to him.

The policeman called Mike was edging over toward her. She didn’t look up. If something could be done . . . something quick, sharp, decisive . . . she glanced at her watch; not yet seven-thirty; amazing! . . . there was still, surely, at least four hours in which to forestall that terrible blow in the

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morrow's papers. . . . Down in the town police station Chief Urquhart would soon, any moment now, be hammering at John Dane, breaking him down, breaking him down . . . oh, didn't she know! . . . Her right hand felt gropingly for that boyishly outspoken letter of his, deep in her coat pocket. Her left, as if to distract attention from its fellow, played among those pencils.

'You mustn't take it too hard, Miss.' Mike, who had, now you came to think of it, been bursting with speech, was breaking out at last. 'He's rough, he's hard as nails, Jim Urquhart is, but believe me, Miss, he's got the heart of a child beating in his breast. The heart of a child . . . Couldn't I point up them pencils for you, Miss? I see a sharpener in the next room.'

'Why, thank you, Mike. It might help.'

He gathered them up. Moved toward the door. Paused. Struggled for a moment with a choking, nearly silent laugh. 'I was just thinking, Miss. You sure did toss him a couple of hot ones.' After which brief tribute he went into the den, and the door swung to after him.

Up to that moment Elsie, though she knew

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that she was going to do something and do it with all her feverish might, had seen no clear way. But now her quick eyes rested on the paper parcel in the corner. The pearl cap . . . Mr. Wong . . . Ting Pao . . . Sin! A queer, confused train of thought. She got up; stepped lightly out into the hall. The living room was empty. Of course! They'd be eating. She went around to the *porte cochère* — walked right out. She wouldn't sneak. They could stop her if they wanted to. She crossed the road and picked her way through the dark garden to the end of the path. Spoke, guardedly, 'Mr. Andrews.'

He was there, waiting.

'I want you to take me to New York,' she said. 'Don't worry about your story. Before the evening's over I think you'll have all you can handle.' A nervous, soft laugh came. 'In fact, you're in it.'

V

15

‘WHERE is it you wish to be taken?’

Elsie jumped. Mr. Ben Andrews had thrown an arm over the back of the front seat and was looking around. He spoke respectfully. Rather good looking, he was, with an air of being a bit of a personage in his own circle. A big youngish man, with quite a lot of black hair bulging out beneath the brim of his hat. The other, a wizened little person, rather older (with a face like one of those queer caricature fish in the Aquarium), drove the car. Dimly, casually, she seemed to know that the fish was named Phil. . . . Funny! Yes, the pair of them had talked together a little, in the front seat. But they hadn’t disturbed her. She was curled up alone in the rear, sitting on her foot; and the foot was asleep. Funny, that fish-person. He was silent now, but she recalled a husky, croaky voice that went perfectly with the face. Her right hand kept pressing deeper and deeper into her coat pocket, down against John Dane’s letter.

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‘Why? We’re not in already? My word, it’s the Queensborough Bridge!’ Her voice sounded natural enough. Fortunate, that, for her brain was a crazy tangle of racing wild thoughts . . . the obscene picture of that murdered man on the floor of the den — Mrs. Cuppy sobbing and pounding her pillow — the pitiless energy of Chief Urquhart — the tortured look in John Dane’s eyes and the sting of his kisses on her lips — the crushing threat of the morning papers, only a few quick hours away — testy, bored people playing bridge — the throbbing gloom of the Gargoyle’s violin — goldfish in a shadowy, dimpling stream . . . exaltation was hers, and terror, and a confused dread, and an unreasoning, fighting instinct to carry on. Time enough to slump when the job was done.

The car sped down through the plaza at the New York end of the bridge, crossed the Avenue, and stopped at the curb in Sixty-First Street.

‘Well,’ asked Ben Andrews, ‘how about it? What now?’

‘I’ve got to find Mr. Wong at once,’ said Elsie. Funny, she couldn’t conceivably have

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explained herself, yet there was something in the back of her head, something firm and strong (almost like another personality that she didn't know very well) that appeared to understand precisely what it purposed doing.

'But he's back there at the Cuppy house.'

'No. They let him go. A policeman drove him. He must be home by now. Better stop some place and telephone his house. He'll surely be in the book. Tell him Miss Penn must see him at once. Must.'

She saw the two of them exchange a quick glance when she gave her name. Of course, they'd all figured in the afternoon papers. But it didn't matter.

It was Ben Andrews who went into the glaring white drug store on a corner. She watched him elbowing his way through the crowd at the long soda fountain and entering a mahogany booth. She held her wrist watch around to the light. A minute . . . two . . . three . . . five . . . Why didn't he hurry! . . . Out he came. If he knew what she was living through he'd run. She felt irritated. That was silly, of course. There was no time for personal emotions. As there was (confusing, this!) no time for anything else. Here he was!

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He stepped into the car, slammed the door, and mopped a wide and rather pleasant forehead. 'Well,' said he, as if thinking aloud, 'what do you know about that!'

'About *what?*' cried Elsie, tapping an impatient foot.

'It wasn't easy to talk with that Chinese servant. But I made out that Wong had telephoned he'd be home almost an hour back. Hadn't appeared. They were worried. I had me a hunch then, called the paper, and got the story. Our man at police headquarters phoned it in. Some men in another car attacked Wong out near Woodside. Crowded his car off the road and shot it up. As a result, Wong is on the danger list at the Long Island City Hospital. The cop who was driving him was shot through the left wrist. He got his gun out and put up a fight. Drove 'em off. They probably mistook him for a chauffeur. They got clean away, of course. And that, Miss Penn, appears to be that.'

It was a blow. Elsie sat motionless. Nice little Mr. Wong! . . . But that other personality was stirring restlessly in the back of her head. 'Tell me,' she broke out, 'have you ever heard of a man called Ting Pao?'

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‘Ting Pao? Sure! He has a curio store on Mott Street, with a big restaurant upstairs. The boys from the paper eat there quite a lot.’

‘Would he be there now?’

‘Almost certain to. These big Chinese fellows never stop working, you know.’

‘Chairman of the New York Committee of the Chinese Nationalist Party,’ croaked Phil. ‘His name’s been up in this case. The police questioned him this noon, but didn’t hold him. He couldn’t or wouldn’t tell anything. Quite a responsible man, you know.’

‘Please go there!’ said Elsie.

A wide, bright stairway. An enormous room, lighted in red and yellow and blue. Chinese chairs and tables in exotic filigree work, inlaid with glistening nacre. A cashier’s desk that suggested the five-and-ten. Walls of incongruous blue-and-white tiling. Queer white people dining; couples that eyed each other couple guardedly. A nickel-in-the-slot piano grinding out a current jazz tune. Soft-shod Chinese waiters with cropped, bristling heads. Ben Andrews asked for Mr. Ting. Finally he came, a short, stout man; shorter and stouter than Mr.

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Wong. Younger, apparently. More vigor. Shrewdly quiet eyes in a round strong face.

The reporters waited for Elsie to speak. She did so. 'I have something very important to talk over with you, Mr. Ting Pao,' she said. 'Will you be so kind as to take us somewhere where we can't be overheard?'

If Ting Pao had been a white man you'd have said that he hesitated. But in his case hesitation is not quite the word. He simply stood motionless, looking at them, taking them in. The nearest thing to a flicker of expression on the round face had been the first look he gave the two reporters. You sensed that he knew them. Elsie glanced quickly at her watch. But Ting Pao was unhurried. Finally, in his own good time, and still without a word, he led the way to a private room and closed the door. They sat about a square black table with a marble top and with carved legs and sides inlaid with that characteristic nacre.

'Well,' asked Ting Pao — to Elsie's surprise in easy, natural English — 'what can I do for you?'

'I,' said Elsie (and it was startling to sense how firm was her purpose and how clear her

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words, for that conscious region she had always supposed to be her mind was still at the mercy of those crazily confused, racing memories and thoughts) . . . 'I am Miss Penn, Mrs. Cuppy's secretary. I have had a strange, really a terrible experience to-day. I discovered Mr. Cuppy's' — a very brief pause — 'body this morning. Since then, all day, I have been helping the police officials by taking down in shorthand all the testimony of the people in the house.' It was beginning, already, to be a long speech, but it all had to be said. The reporters were watching her with a puzzled interest. And Ting Pao's slanting eyes with the drooping lids never wavered from her face. How still he could sit!

'So it happens, Mr. Ting Pao, that I have had to pay close attention to every detail of the case. I suppose I — well, I know all that is known about it.' Here, for an instant, her breath caught. She didn't know what Chief Urquhart might at this moment be doing to John Dane in that country police station! 'I'm not going to talk about that. I was acting in a confidential capacity, and have no right to. But I have also talked privately

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with Mr. Wong. Last night, very late, he came out to the Cuppy house to get the pearl cap. You know something about that, I believe.'

Ting Pao didn't move.

'Well,' Elsie went on, with a quick little touch of vehemence, 'I do.' . . . She seemed to be speaking in the manner of those police officials. Funny! A good deal of Mr. Atkinson and Mr. Carlock; something actually of Chief Urquhart. Evidently she hadn't for nothing spent the whole day sensitively, even morbidly, absorbed in that inquisition. It had done something to her. Had done this. . . . 'I know that it was shipped to you as head of the Nationalist Party here in New York. It was stolen, however, before it reached you, and sold to Mr. Cuppy. I don't know your attitude toward Mr. Wong. His life was threatened, you know. And this evening he has been shot and perhaps killed.' She watched the round face, but ever the eyelids were motionless. Though he simply couldn't have known. 'He had been asked to help, Mr. Wong had. He had already given money to aid your war in China. Now he was asked to find a buyer for the pearl cap.

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It was natural that he should be asked. He is a very influential merchant. But the cap never reached him, because it never reached you. It must have reached New York, because it was sold to Mr. Cuppy several days ago. By the thieves, undoubtedly. Those men got their money, and escaped. But the men who killed Mr. Cuppy and the men who shot Mr. Wonghaven't escaped, and they won't. You see that. No Chinese could leave the city to-night without being seen and suspected.

'The first Mr. Wong knew of all this was last evening, when he was threatened, by telephone. He came out at once to try to buy the cap from Mr. Cuppy and deliver it to you. He offered his whole personal fortune. I know this, because I am the one he talked with when he came. I have heard his story and I believe it. I am sure that Mr. Wong is not a thief. He never hired thieves to steal that cap. I am convinced that he has the interests of your party as deeply at heart as you have. He was as anxious as you, as anxious as Hung Lo in Shanghai, to convert that wonderful cap into money to help your armies. He knew, too, that there was no time to be lost. Do you agree with me?'

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There was a long silence. But at last Ting Pao spoke. (Elsie had made up her mind that she could sit as patiently as he.) . . . 'I don't know,' he said. 'I don't know anything about all this.'

'Forgive me, Mr. Ting Pao, but that isn't fair. I am laying my case before you as frankly as I possibly can, and for a reason. I'll give you that reason in a minute. But I do hope you will decide to be as frank with me.'

'But I don't know what you mean. I am sorry.'

'You knew about the cap.'

'I have a letter from Hung Lo in Shanghai and a telegram from San Francisco. Two men, the telegram says, are bringing the cap. It does not come.'

'You knew that Mr. Wong had been told of it.'

'No.'

'I am sorry . . . you did. It was you yourself who asked him to sell it for the party.'

Another silence. 'And you know, Mr. Ting Pao, exactly who you did and didn't talk with about this cap. Don't you see what I mean? *You are the only one that did know!* You

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had the letter and the telegram. You asked Mr. Wong to undertake the sale. Very well, then, it stands to reason, doesn't it, that the men who threatened to kill Mr. Wong when they found that the cap had been stolen, must have heard of it from you? You know, then, who threatened Mr. Wong, what man or men.'

'No.'

'Yes. And you know who is really responsible for the attack on him to-night.'

'No. I don't know.'

'Wait a moment, please! I don't want you to misunderstand my purpose in coming here. I'm not representing the police. I'm not here to get you into trouble. I'm here for a definite reason, and I've got to win you to my view of the situation if the thing can be done. These gentlemen are reporters, but I think you know them and I believe you can trust them. I'm going to make you an offer, Mr. Ting Pao. An offer that I hope will make you think it worth your while to help — to help justice, to help prevent a tragic blunder from being made by the police. Listen! You know all about this cap business. You must! I don't believe you're a murderer. You

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know Mr. Wong. You must believe him to be a man of honor. Tell me, do you trust him or don't you?'

Silence. Finally, 'Oh, yes. Wong and I are old friends. He is an honorable man.'

'Certainly. I haven't known him quite twenty-four hours. But I know I could trust him. You, too, Mr. Ting Pao, are spoken of as an honorable man. You have a business. You are respected. I believe, if you will let me, I could trust you as I would trust him. But first you must be frank with me.'

'But I don't know.'

Elsie sighed. She didn't catch the fact that those searching eyes of the two reporters were now studying her pallor and the red spots on her cheeks. That person in the back of her head was keeping mercilessly at her, driving her on. She glanced at her watch.

'Let me see if I can't make it easier for you,' she said. 'You are really in a position that makes it just about impossible for you to admit anything. To say anything, even. I find I have something of the picture in my mind, pieced together from things Mr. Wong has said. I'm sure that neither you nor

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Mr. Wong would have anything to do with either thieving or murder. But there are men in your party councils, here in New York, who are a lot more excitable than you and Mr. Wong. The great march of the Southern armies has driven them half wild. They cannot always be controlled. Perhaps they are frightened, too. Perhaps they didn't mean murder. But they did mean to get that wonderful cap, and sell it, and hurry the money out to Shanghai. Probably they can't control their people. And now that it has resulted in one murder and perhaps two, they don't know what to do. Is that a fair picture of it?

Silence.

'Listen! To-night the police, I know, are about ready to accuse two persons of that murder. Two innocent persons. One of them is simply incapable of doing such a thing. The other is a gentleman. It is unthinkable that he could be guilty. There is some circumstantial evidence. They can never be convicted. Never in the world. But if the story that country police chief has to tell, because he wants the publicity — no other reason, just that filthy hunger to push

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himself — if that story appears in the papers to-morrow morning those two persons will be ruined. Are you willing to sit here and let them be ruined?’

‘But what has all this to do with me?’

‘By keeping silent you are shielding the real murderers.’

‘Oh, no! I am not doing that!’

‘Wait, Mr. Ting Pao . . . you know who these firebrands are. You know all about Chinatown. Don’t forget that Mr. Wong was threatened last night and shot to-night. You know who you’ve talked with about this cap. And you know exactly how they feel. So I say, by keeping silent you are shielding murderers.’

Silence. It lengthened. Elsie looked at her watch. There was a breathless sense of drama in the room.

Suddenly Ting Pao dropped his head into his hands.

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‘You know, don’t you’ — Elsie, thrusting her argument home — ‘that some of your Chinese people went to the Cuppy house last night to steal back that cap?’

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Slowly, wearily, Ting Pao lifted his head. In that long moment, her nervously alert faculties caught the abrupt change in the round face. It actually appeared to have lost its fullness. There was a haggard look. He settled back, like an utterly tired man, in his chair. His plump but strong hands fell nervelessly across his thighs. He raised those hands a little way as if to make a gesture of protest; but let them fall again.

‘I will tell you,’ he said, in an unsteady voice. ‘I do not know all that you think. But it is true that I am in a terrible position. It is true that some of our people seem to have lost their heads. I don’t know who stole the cap from the two messengers. I am sure they themselves had no hand in such a crime. The cap was taken from a hand-bag, here in Chinatown, the night they arrived. So they have told me. Now about the murder of Mr. Cuppy. I do not know who killed him. It may be, as you say, that he was killed by men of my race who went out there during the night to try to recover the cap. And I do not know who attacked Wong. I have no idea. But there has been great trouble in our Committee — the New York Committee of

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the Nationalist Party — over the loss of the pearl cap. It represented such a large amount of money. I have known that there were men on the Committee who did not look at this trouble through my eyes.'

A croaking voice sounded. Elsie started. Up to now not a word had come from the reporters. 'Mr. Ting, tell us, did you hear any threats against Wong in the Committee when the theft was being discussed?'

Another of those silences. Ting Pao considered the fish-faced one, then turned his gaze deliberately back to Elsie. 'No,' said he, 'I heard no threats. Nothing so strong as that.'

'But' — the croak persisted — 'you heard suspicions voiced?'

'Yes.'

Elsie leaned forward. 'Just a minute, please! Mr. Ting Pao . . . I want to tell you what is on my mind to do, and to try to persuade you to do. Listen! Do you know a man, a servant, called Sin? That is the only name I know. Just Sin. He was butler at the Cuppy house. Before that he worked for Mr. Wong.'

'Yes, I remember Sin.'

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'If you have read the papers you know that the Chinese servants all disappeared early this morning. Well, five of them gave themselves up this afternoon. All but Sin. The truth appears to be that they found the body and simply ran off in a panic. During the day they thought better of it and returned. Their story is that they haven't seen Sin at all. He had vanished before they came downstairs this morning. Nobody knows where he is, or whether he's alive or dead. Mr. Wong assures me that he's an honest, faithful man . . . Now, Mr. Ting Pao, Sin, if he is alive, knows something about that murder. Perhaps he saw it. I believe that he was carried away by the murderers. I simply can't get him out of my mind. I mean, after listening all day long to the stories of those people, after writing down every word, every single detail, until it all seems to be etched into my brain, I come back to Sin. If we can find him we'll learn — something. It may be only a hunch, but I believe it. I feel it so strongly that I'm going to make you a proposition.'

Ben Andrews shifted his chair nearer. Mr. Fish-Face sat, elbows on the marble top of

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the table, his almost chinless face propped between two skinny fists, his pale eyes staring. Elsie herself was gripping the edge of the table with both hands.

‘I realize,’ she went on, ‘that perhaps you cannot do what I’m going to ask you to do, without running some real risk yourself. You have to deal with hot-headed, terribly excited men. But if you refuse to do it you will be in the position, as I have said, of shielding murderers.’

‘No,’ said Ting Pao, brokenly, ‘I will not do that.’

‘I suppose you don’t know, now, where this Sin is.’

‘No, I do not.’

‘But you know Chinatown. If he is, as I believe, shut up there somewhere, you could find him.’

‘Yes. I believe I could.’

‘Remember, Mr. Ting’ — this was another eager, excited croak — ‘the police couldn’t find him in ten years. Not if he’s locked up underground in Chinatown.’

‘No. I don’t believe they could.’

‘Then,’ pursued Elsie, before Fish-Face could croak again; she didn’t want him

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talking . . . 'then here is my proposition. Find Sin. Now. Right away. I've got to keep ahead of the newspapers. Find Sin. You will know where to go, whom to ask. Give me your word that you will deliver him within an hour, alive and able to talk, and I believe I can put the pearl cap into your hands.'

'When?'

'That I can't say exactly. The cap has been found. The police have it. If, as I believe, Sin can clear up this mystery, the police will restore it to you. Isn't the chance worth taking?'

A long silence. Then, 'Yes.' Ting Pao rose. 'I will have to go myself. Oh, five minutes, ten minutes. Not long. I must not telephone. You will please wait here.' And he left the room.

Fish-Face sprang up and paced the floor. But Andrews tap-tapped on the table. Tap-tap-tapped. 'Miss Penn,' he broke out, 'if I had my hat on I'd take it off right now and make you a low bow. That was a wonderful job! An amazing job!'

Elsie shook her head. She couldn't talk about that. Her eyes sought her watch. They

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felt strained and tired. It took an effort to focus them on the watch. Specks of light were dancing round the edge of those eyes.

She started and shivered, with a low sound of fright. Some one was pawing at her from behind. It was Fish-Face, groping for her hand. He wrung it; hurt it; turned away. He didn't speak. The exaltation that had inspired her, driven her, carried her, was dying out. It had been like a performance, like a highly pitched scene, played under terrific stress. Now it was over. That other personality that she'd felt she didn't know very well had possessed her. It was fading now. Leaving her alone with herself and two reporters in a back room of a Chinese restaurant. She'd be crying in a minute. Just all unstrung. But she couldn't humor her weakness. The job wasn't finished yet.

How those precious minutes were clicking away!

A step sounded in the passage. The door opened. Ting Pao entered. 'He is here. Not far.'

'Sin?'

'Yes. Ten minutes and I will get him. They will give him up.'

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Ben Andrews rose. 'Need any help, Mr. Ting?'

'No. It is best that I go alone. Sin has been hurt. His arm is broken. But I am assured that he can travel.'

Elsie had been struggling to speak. Now some of her voice came.

'You are giving me your word, Mr. Ting Pao?'

'Yes. I am giving you my word.'

'You will bring Sin no matter what the cost? Even if they try to kill you?'

'Yes.' He sighed. Wiped a beaded forehead. Then, with a quiet 'Wait here, please,' went out again.

Elsie dropped her head on her arms and sobbed. She didn't see or hear the whispered words that passed between Ben Andrews and Fish-Face. But the latter moved to the door. She caught that. And the door suddenly opened; and a voice she knew remarked crisply, 'What's going on here?' Mr. Carlock! Here!

Ben Andrews called, 'Why, hello, George! You're just in time!'

The croaky voice husked out something or other . . . 'Just going to get her a bracer,

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George. All in, poor kid. But Jesus Christ! Believe me, George! She's . . .'

'Get aromatic spirits of ammonia, Phil!' Carlock's voice, low, authoritative. 'None of this bum liquor!'

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Mr. Carlock, seated at the table, stirred the faintly opalescent fluid. The spoon clanked in the glass. He had sent the reporters out into the restaurant and closed the door. 'Here, Miss Penn, drink this. It will buck you up.'

She lifted her head. Dried her eyes. Pushed the glass away. 'No. I don't want it.'

She looked at him, and he at her. Her spent nerves were rallying, as they had rallied under Chief Urquhart's probing. That fatalistic strength was returning. Once again she was beginning not to care.

'So!' said he. 'You ran away.'

'No. I walked.'

'Why?'

'Because none of you were doing anything.'

'You know nothing about that.'

'I know enough. You — even you —

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were going to let that awful story go out in the morning papers.'

'About Mrs. Cuppy and John Dane?'

'Yes.'

'But what did you think you could do?'

'I rather think I've done it.'

'Indeed? Well — suppose you tell me just what it is you've done.'

But Elsie, white now, and calm in a tense way, slumped back in her chair, was thinking. She came out with this: 'How did you find me?'

'Really! You didn't think you could wander around without being seen?'

'Oh! You mean I've been watched?'

'Certainly. Every minute.'

'Every min . . .' A touch of color fluttered in her cheeks. Those crazily mixed memories again. That moment in the garden with John Dane!

'Every minute. Since ten o'clock this morning. My instructions to Sergeant Stafford were to permit you to move about freely but not to let you get out of his sight. He obeyed literally. Almost too literally. When you asked Ben Andrews to drive you into the city, he simply jumped on his motorcycle and

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followed you. You came here to Ting Pao's. He telephoned me. So much for that. Now I'm going to ask you to explain.'

'Well' — she had to pause in a desperate effort to arrange her thoughts — 'well, I think I just felt that something had to be done, and done quickly.'

'How did you get away? Where was that officer . . . Mike?'

'He'd gone into the den to sharpen my pencils.'

'I see. And you walked out.'

'Yes.'

'I notice you didn't stop to get your hat.'

'I didn't stop for anything.'

'But where did you pick up these reporters?'

'Mr. Andrews had spoken to me earlier in the evening. When I was walking in the garden.'

'Hmm! I see. That explains something Stafford didn't quite get.'

'He offered me money to take a note to Mr. Delos. Fifty dollars. I didn't answer then.'

'That's right. Delos writes for the "Morning Earth." I see. Well, I wonder if you realize just what you've done.'

Lady Can Do

‘Oh, yes.’ Wearily she said that.

‘You were pretty outspoken with Chief Urquhart this afternoon. He’s a very determined man. And a stubborn man. You’ve seen that.’

‘Oh, yes.’

‘He never forgets a grudge. And he has some power. He can make it pretty unpleasant for you.’

‘Oh, yes. But he’s — oh — oh, just all wet.’

‘I’m afraid you’re hardly in a position to sit in judgment over him, Miss Penn. You were in the position of being detained as an important witness. You ran away. That is serious business. Very serious. And it gives him a hold on you.’

‘I suppose so. But — oh, I’ve got eyes, and ears, Mr. Carlock! I’d been sitting there all day, taking everything down. It was clear enough what Mr. Urquhart was driving at. And he was wrong.’

‘Oh, he was wrong?’

‘Certainly. And you weren’t lifting a hand.’

‘Never mind that! Just what was your idea in coming here?’

Lady Can Do

'To find the murderers.'

'And just who are they?'

'The Chinese who went out to the Cuppy house last night to get the pearl cap. Mr. Wong sensed it. They were after him, and killed the wrong man. You heard him, this morning.'

'Yes, I heard him. So you thought you could come right in here and find the murderers?'

'No. Not at all.' Astonishing how her spirit could still flare up. Lucky, too. She welcomed it. 'But I believed I could find a man who would know the truth.'

'And just who is that?'

'Sin.'

'The butler?'

'Yes. He is a trained, faithful servant. He'd never take part in a murder.'

'How do you know that?'

'Mr. Wong told me so. And when he talked with me last night, I liked him. I know he is honest.'

'And because you liked Sin, and Mr. Wong told you that he . . . Quite delightfully simple, isn't it?'

'Mr. Carlock, can't you see that those

Lady Can Do

officials out there are simply believing the wrong people?’

‘You don’t know that.’

‘I know that I wouldn’t trust that man Stromberg out of my sight.’

‘Why not?’

‘I don’t like his eyes.’

‘Oh! Really!’

‘You heard him lie about the time he went upstairs. You *heard* him! Doesn’t that mean anything to you? Exactly two-twenty-five when he was in his room, he said. He took pains to fix that. And Dr. Obry is positive that the murder took place after four. How about that?’

Carlock knit his brows. Then abruptly, he said, ‘Let’s get back on the main topic. You came in here because you thought you could find Sin in Chinatown, did you?’

‘Certainly not. But I’d thought of a man who could.’

‘Who?’

‘Mr. Ting Pao. I tried to get in touch with Mr. Wong first. But he’d been shot.’

‘Oh, you know of that.’

‘Mr. Andrews called up his paper.’

‘I see. But where is Ting Pao now?’

Lady Can Do

‘He has gone to get Sin.’

‘To get Sin? Hmm! And how did you persuade him to do that?’

‘Oh . . . I can’t tell you, Mr. Carlock. My head’s swimming. I talked pretty hard. I think I made him see that he was shielding murderers and permitting innocent persons to be accused. And I told him that the cap has been found, and that if Sin, as I believe, could clear up the case, I felt sure that the police would be willing to restore the cap.’

‘You proposed a trade, then?’

‘Yes. Just that . . . They dragged Sin out and kept him prisoner. They hurt him. Broke his arm.’

‘Well . . . really, Miss Penn, this is an extraordinary situation. I suppose I shall have to believe that you have acted from natural enough human motives, however unwise. I must try to make it clear to you that you are in a pretty delicate position. Of course, if this man comes through, if he delivers Sin, and then if Sin turns out to be a real witness, say an eye-witness . . . and there you have a couple of pretty big ifs, Miss Penn . . . why, it is just possible that we may be able to keep Urquhart from making things

Lady Can Do

very unpleasant for you. But if there's a slip anywhere, or if Sin doesn't *know* . . . well' — he spread his hands — 'I'm sorry, that's all. I'm afraid you'll have to take your medicine.' He sat very still, thinking this over, gravely. 'But why, Miss Penn, in Heaven's name! Why didn't you tell us out there what you were thinking instead of taking this wild plunge?'

'You wouldn't have listened.'

'We might have. We listened when you ran down that matter of Stromberg's overcoat.'

'You'd have felt that I was simply all out to save John Dane.'

'Possibly . . . well, of course . . .'

'I suppose I was, in a way.' She sighed wearily. 'And then Mr. Urquhart drove me clean out of myself. *He'd* never have listened! He is all out for a conviction.'

'I understand that, but . . . See here, Miss Penn, my duty is clear. I've got to send you back there. At once.'

Elsie went limp. 'Oh . . . !' It was hardly more than a weak breath.

'I'm sorry. It isn't so pleasant out there right now. And your standing with Mr. Urquhart is none too high. He's not the sort

Lady Can Do

that can endure much back talk. He may lock you up. He can. This is the biggest thing he's ever got hold of. He'll stop at nothing. But out you go! There's no delaying that.' He opened the door and called guardedly.

Elsie covered her face.

Mr. Carlock returned to the table. 'I'm sorry I can't say much of anything that would cheer you. It's a grim business. . . . Well, my advice to you is to sit very, very tight. Don't talk at all. I really doubt if I can do a thing for you, but . . . Tell me, is Ting Pao supposed to be bringing that man Sin back here?'

'Yes, Mr. Carlock. Right away. Any moment.'

'Very good. I'll wait. Give him a fair chance to make good . . . Oh, Stafford!'

The sergeant appeared. Still a quiet-appearing young American in civilian clothes. He inclined his head courteously toward Elsie.

'Take Miss Penn back to the Cuppy house. You've got your side car?'

'Yes, Lieutenant.'

'Very good. Go ahead.'

Elsie dragged herself to the door. Caught at the knob. Hesitated. 'Mr. Carlock.

Lady Can Do

About Mr. Ting Pao. He knew something. I think he was really in a pretty difficult position. And I'm sure it took a lot of courage for him to go out to that other crowd of his people and arrange to deliver Sin. You see, they'd never have dragged him off except to protect themselves. I hope you won't be hard on him. On Ting Pao, I mean. And please see that he gets the pearl cap.'

'If he comes decently through I think you'll find that he won't suffer, Miss Penn. There's some common sense, even a little humanity, in policemen. About the cap I promise nothing. Oh, if Sin was an eye-witness, if he can clear it all up, fine! But that's a pretty long chance.'

Sergeant Stafford offered, rather clumsily, to take her arm. But she pulled herself together, said, 'I'm all right,' and went out. Passing through the restaurant she contrived a wan smile for the waiting reporters. The sergeant helped her into the side car. They roared off uptown toward the Queensborough Bridge and Long Island. And all the way Elsie's right hand, deep in her coat pocket, gripped with nervous intensity a wadded-up note.

VI

18

It was night. The streets were gorges. The bridge was a black path into a gigantic, ominous spider's web. Out on the island highway shapes of houses and trees slipped by in a dark blur. Thousands of lights rushed and glared; thousands upon thousands of lights; like pairs of blazing eyes on roaring monsters that came endlessly at you and almost got you. Almost.

They swung through the Chinesy arch into the winding driveway. There was the dim mass of the house, with lights in it; the *porte cochère*; the shadowy depths of the rock garden. Were those people still playing bridge? She shivered. She simply couldn't step again into that house. But she must. Must perhaps, even, enter the Chinese room and face that stupidly, stubbornly adamant Chief and that Coroner who'd formerly had a livery stable and who spat on an exquisite Chinese rug. Yes, she was out of the machine, she was quietly mounting the steps. She was

Lady Can Do

inside. In the side hall. In the den (she kept her eyes up). A door opened. The sergeant (in the doorway) asked if they wished Miss Penn in there. The Chief's voice replied, with a rasp, 'Certainly.' So she entered, and Sergeant Stafford slipped back and shut the door.

Her heart sank. She had really forgotten something of the power of these men and the personal force of Chief Urquhart. But here they were! Here they sat, about the table, looking. It helped a little to see Dr. Obry. There was a queer hush in the room. A fire blazed in the fireplace, but didn't look cheerful. Funny how they all looked at her. Their faces seemed rather tired and haggard. Did they know? Or had she merely interrupted the course of some tense talk? What on earth were they thinking? She hadn't a notion what she ought to do. But still they didn't say anything. Not one word. She certainly had nothing to say herself. And Mr. Carlock had ordered her not to talk. She slipped out of her coat and took her seat. Her pencils, neatly sharpened, lay in a row before her. She looked up. The policeman called Mike was leaning against the mantel.

Lady Can Do

As if nothing untoward had happened. He winked. And she found herself acknowledging that wink with the ghost of a smile. She felt like a ghost. It might actually be that they didn't so much as know she'd been off the property. Heaven could testify that they'd been engrossed in their own ugly business. The personal problem now was to make the scene come real. She'd wrenched herself, for an hour or two, out of it; and now couldn't get back in. Just a nightmare!

Chief Urquhart brought his big hand down flat on the table.

The silence continued a moment longer.

Dr. Obry rose. 'I suppose, then, you will wish to go up there again.'

'No,' said the Chief, with finality. 'No!'

'She is' — Dr. Obry — 'in a state of genuine hysteria. That extremely unpleasant scene this afternoon left her in a pitiable condition. Since then she has heard nothing from you. She has been left to her own devices, to her own thoughts. The result is heart-breaking. If this treatment is to be kept up — this system of solitude interrupted by brutality — I feel that I cannot answer for her health or even for her reason. I am

Lady Can Do

not sure that you wish for any statement of opinion from me, Jim . . .'

'Not particularly, Fred. You tend to your business and I'll tend to mine.'

'Very well.' Dr. Obry's tired face flushed perceptibly. They were speaking of Mrs. Cuppy. Elsie's jaded brain had caught that. And Dr. Obry was putting up a bit of a battle for her. His name, it appeared, was Fred. The Chief was Jim, of course. Two middle-aged citizens of the town. They knew each other, those two. Fred and Jim!

The Chief again banged down that big hand. 'Bring her right down here!' he commanded.

'Here?'

'You heard me.'

'I must protest against that, Jim! She is really ill, with a temperature . . . a woman of delicate sensibilities . . .'

'Mike' — the Chief — 'go right up and bring Mrs. Cuppy down. Tell the nurse to throw some clothes on her, and be quick about it. Something more to say, eh? All right! She'll say it, and she'll say it right here in this room! She's had her chance, that one!'

So they were back at it! And brutally as

Lady Can Do

ever. Milling round and round in that same disheartening, morbid mess. Round and round and round. But more ploddingly now. The keener interest of the morning and afternoon — the response to vivid fresh drama that stirs even a policeman's blood at first — was gone. Worn out. Elsie drew in a quick breath. Even the air was stale. Why didn't they open the windows, blow it out. Thick, syrupy air. Dead cigars — a half moon of them about the hearth where they'd been carelessly tossed — stinking there. Dust on the furniture; ashes strewn about the rug . . . already the beautiful room was filthy. Like the case. Like the minds of that Coroner and Mr. Jim Urquhart.

Mr. Atkinson, who had been leaning forward with his head on one hand, breathed heavily and shifted his head to the other hand. He looked wrung.

Dr. Obry squared his shoulders. 'Very well, Jim, but I can't let this ugly business go on without a protest. The name of Cuppy means something in this town. You seem to have forgotten that. Mr. Atkinson there has warned you once to-day. There's a limit to your sort of . . .'

Lady Can Do

'That'll do, Fred! I'm in charge here. The less you say, the better!'

'But it won't do, Jim. And God help you if you're wrong!'

'Hey, Mike!' Urquhart was roaring now. 'What are you gawking at? Can't you understand a plain order?'

The policeman muttered, 'Yes, Chief,' and moved toward the door. Dr. Obry, with deep lines in his gray face, said quickly, 'I'll go with you.' The door closed on the two of them.

The Chief sat immovable. Waiting. The Coroner spat. Mr. Atkinson shifted his head to the other hand; then picked up a pencil and fell to drawing aimless diagrams on the pad before him, painstakingly shading the lines and then adding rows of dots and curly-cues. Elsie, in a state of painful fascination, watched the moving pencil.

The clock on the mantel ticked loudly. Minutes passed. Minutes and minutes. Elsie wrenched her gaze away from that swift pencil and looked at the clock. Chief Urquhart's wooden face turned toward her now and then. She could feel his eyes. Ten minutes of ten. The papers would have to

Lady Can Do

know within an hour or so. Probably midnight would do. They'd wait up to the last possible minute, of course. At least those 'Morning Earth' men knew something of what they had to wait for. Thank God they were with Mr. Carlock! He'd have trouble shaking them off now — Ben Andrews and Fish-Face. They'd stick.

The Coroner spat.

This waiting was horrible. Five minutes of ten. Just waiting.

Elsie was staring down at her pencils; endlessly arranging and rearranging them in a neat row. Why didn't the Chief say something to her? What was he trying to do? Break her nerves by making her wait? Well, he couldn't. When he finally moved his big body around in his chair, she felt rather than saw the act. A glance along the table-top corroborated her senses. Those implacable eyes were fixed on her again. She felt them.

'Well, young woman!' Yes, it was that unpleasant stern voice. Slowly she lifted her eyes. She bridled at the phrase, 'young woman.' That spirit of rebellion was rising again. Mr. Carlock had cautioned her

Lady Can Do

against talking. 'Sit tight,' he'd said. Very well, she'd sit tight. He'd be returning, sooner or later. Possibly he'd help her. In so far as he could. It was a fluttering hope. But surely he'd meant something when he said it. Something.

'Where have you been?'

She looked straight at the Chief, compressing her lips. His big fist banged on the table. 'Where have you been? Answer me!'

She simply looked.

'Well . . . are you answering, or aren't you?'

'I'm not.' Curious how the angry resistance this man stirred in her breast overrode her fear of him. Though the fear was there too. But he needn't know that.

'See here, young woman! I'm willing enough to treat you decently, as decently as you'll let me. But you are making it difficult. I'll give you one more chance. If you won't answer, I'll lock you up in a cell as a material witness. And I'll keep you there a while. How do you think you'll like that? Just think it over. . . . Now listen here! You put yourself in a bad light a while back. You undertook to hold out an important bit of evidence.

Lady Can Do

We're not through with you yet on that count. And now, the minute my back is turned, you try to run away. That'll take quite a lot of explaining. You knew that you were under orders not to leave the property. Are you ready to tell me a little about it? Or aren't you?

'No.'

'That State officer brought you back. Where did he find you?'

No answer.

'Now you're simply foolish. Do you think I can't find out? Mike! Bring that State sergeant in here!'

Atkinson raised a hand. There was a shuffling sound in the den. And voices. The door opened.

The Chief lowered his voice. 'All right, young woman! You'll keep. Just make up your mind that I'm a long way from being through with you. You'll be singing another song before morning.'

Mike entered and held the door back. The nurse hurried in with a blanket. She moved an upholstered chair nearer the fire and spread the blanket over it. Finally appeared Dr. Obry with Mrs. Cuppy in his arms.

Lady Can Do

They'd thrown a dainty negligee about her. Blue, with white fur. Nobody'd given a thought to mourning costumes, this day. And in their hurry, upstairs there, they'd just caught up the first handy wrap. Her pretty little feet, shod only in furry slippers, dangled below the doctor's arm. She was whimpering weakly, like a hurt animal. Dr. Obry placed her in the chair, and the nurse drew the blanket about her. Her head sank back. The face was deadly white. Her hands fluttered up over her eyes and the dazzling rings on them were incongruous.

'Well' — thus the Chief, harshly, speaking out of a wooden face — 'so you've got something more to say!'

The only sound in the room then was that whimpering. It grew a little louder. Then the woman gasped for breath. Elsie thought, for a moment, that she might be strangling.

'Come out with it. What is it?' The Chief's voice thundered.

Oh! It really was a relief of a sort, to hear her voice . . . 'I can't! I can't!' It was a relief, too, to be making notes again. Elsie's pencil flew over the page with nervous speed.

Lady Can Do

‘You can’t? Then what are you taking up our time for? What is all this about?’

The whimpering became a sobbing.

‘Now see here, Mrs. Cuppy! We had quite a scene with you upstairs to-day, and we’re not interested in having any more of ’em. You seemed to think you had something more to say. Well . . . *say* it!’

‘I — I . . . oh, God . . . !’

‘Going to play it right out to the finish, are you? Very well, we’ll try a few questions. You’ve admitted, by your own proposal to talk, that you know more than you told us upstairs. Well, what is it?’

Sobs only.

‘Something about John Dane, maybe. You had a little to say about him the other time. He was pestering you. Making love to you. Maybe this time you’re ready to admit that you were making love to him. That it?’

‘Oh, no, no! How dare you! I loved my husband with all my heart!’

‘And so you wrote John Dane begging him to come to your room. You said old Cuppy’d never know. Snoring his fool head off downstairs.’

Lady Can Do

The jeweled hands came down from the ashen, tear-stained face. The blue eyes widened. Stared. They looked really bewildered.

Elsie, pencil poised in air, tried to puzzle that out. Had the shock of the other scene, followed by the hours of waiting alone, turned that flighty brain? Had she, perhaps, really fainted when the Chief was reading her scribbled note aloud. At best she was a fool. You felt that.

‘Oh, come!’ The Chief went grimly, contemptuously on. ‘We simply have no time for this stuff. If you’ve got anything to say, say it! If you think now that maybe you haven’t got anything to say, after all, I’ll just send you down to a neat little cell in the station house and you’ll have all the time you want to think it over. Mike, tell Joe to bring my car around.’

Dr. Obry started; but held his tongue.

Mike left the room.

Mrs. Cuppy, after one wild look, did an odd thing. Simply dropped her hands into her lap and knit her brows. Her breast still moved convulsively with her breathing. She was still crying. But the tears ran unheeded

Lady Can Do

down her cheeks. She kept drawing her brows together. With some difficulty. She'd frown tightly, and then the muscles would appear to slip and the frown would relax. She'd look puzzled and then frown again. You could see that she was trying to think her way out of the web she was caught in. Her mind was really confused; no doubt about that. But she seemed at last to have caught the idea that pose and hysterics couldn't help her. She'd been knocked down to some sort of rock bottom.

Outside, you could hear Mike calling. And then the lights of a car glanced by the windows. Joe was ready.

'I'll tell,' said Mrs. Cuppy. The sobs started up again, but she contrived to get it out. 'It was a little talk I had with Mr. Dane. Just before the crowd went upstairs. Just a few minutes. In the dining-room. He drew me through the doorway. It was dark there. He said . . .'

'Go right on.'

'He said' — a few sobs — 'he said, "We've got to do something about your husband. Get rid of him, somehow."' '

'Was that the first thing he said?'

Lady Can Do

'Yes.'

'Came right out with it, didn't he?'

'Yes.'

'It was just a short talk, eh?'

'Oh, yes!' Eagerly this. 'Only a few minutes. You see, my guests would have missed me if I . . .'

'What then?'

'Oh, I told him that I must go back to my guests. You see . . .'

Mike reappeared. 'Joe's ready, Chief. At the porte cocheeerie.'

'Very good. You wait here. . . . Now Mrs. Cuppy, as I understand this, you were together several minutes. Quite a little more must have been said. What was it?'

'Oh, I . . . we just talked a little. Nothing important.'

'Hm! I see. You just talked. What about?'

'I can't remember every word!'

'No, I suppose not. You agreed with him, did you?'

'Agreed with him? I don't understand you!'

'That something must be done about getting rid of your husband.'

'Certainly not! How dare you!'

Lady Can Do

Urquhart pursed his lips. Deliberately pushed back his chair. As deliberately walked around the table toward the fireplace. Mrs. Cuppy, shrinking back in the big chair as he drew nearer, never took her staring, confused eyes from his bulky figure.

Dr. Obry, his face set, moved forward protectingly.

'It's all right, Fred,' remarked the Chief. 'I'm not going to hurt her. I just want to be sure we've got this straight.' He stood squarely over the cowed, struggling woman. 'Now, Mrs. Cuppy, as you've put it, John Dane drew you into the dining-room. The first words he said were a proposal to do something about getting rid of your husband. And you listened!'

'Oh, no, I . . .'

'Yes, you did! You let him say it. You stayed right there and let him say it! Chatted with him. About getting rid of your husband. Only left him because you really felt it might be thought rude not to rejoin your guests. And then you went upstairs and wrote that cute little note, begging him to come to your room. What kind of a wife do you call yourself, anyway? You didn't run

Lady Can Do

away from him as a murderer. You didn't even strike him. Just stayed there and chatted about things so unimportant that you can't even remember. Little things. Oh, killing a husband and things like that. Don't you realize what you've been saying? Good God! . . . Mike! Tell Joe to pick up a couple of men and fetch John Dane here. Tell him to step on it. Needn't take five minutes. Bring him right in here.'

Mike left the room. A moment later the car rushed off by the windows, and Mike returned.

The Chief stared down at that pitiful figure in the chair. 'I'm going to get to the bottom of this,' he said, 'if it takes all night. You meant this for a charge against John Dane. Didn't you? *Didn't you?* . . . Been lying up there in your bed thinking up neat little stories. Trying to save yourself. But you can't do it. You can't do it! You're not good enough at the game. Making a mess of it. Just a poor thing, aren't you? In over your head. Floundering.' He bent over the chair, his big hands resting on the two arms. 'Why don't you come clean, Mrs. Cuppy? Why don't you tell the truth? Haven't you

Lady Can Do

any courage, any heart? Your husband, the man that's done everything in the world for you, lies dead in Bill Deem's undertaking shop downtown. His head all crushed in with a hatchet.' He paused. Simply took his time. Then, with a deliberate, dramatic force — with a quality not altogether removed from a crudish sort of majesty — added (his eyes probing her squirming, pitifully evasive soul) — '*You know who swung that hatchet!*'

Dr. Obry cried out in anguish — 'Oh, Jim, for God's sake! She doesn't know a thing that happened last night. She was . . .'

The Chief cut him off with a curt — 'Shut up, Fred! I'm dealing with murder. You keep out of it!'

The tragic little figure in the chair was nearly hidden by his huge form. It was the nurse who cried out, 'Doctor! She has fainted!'

Instantly, once again, Dr. Obry took command. This was his province. He caught her up in his arms, rested the limp body across a bent knee, and lowered the loosely swinging head. For a few moments he and the nurse worked over her. Then he carried

Lady Can Do

her to a sofa, and gave her a dose of something from one of the bottles in his bag. Held her head and put the bottle between her nerveless gray lips.

The Chief followed them. Stood menacingly, silently over them. You felt that he'd spring again, the minute her eyes opened. Spring like a tiger.

And Elsie, sitting tensely on the edge of her chair, looked on. A queer sad sort of fire seemed to be consuming her body. They were bringing John Dane. . . .

19

He looked years older. The presence of tragedy had touched, softened, deepened his face. His eyes were dull, set back in shadowy hollows. Such a weary, weary face! Feeling that if she let a muscle move she'd run to him, cry over him, caress him, Elsie sat motionless. With a sensation of clinging desperately to her chair.

He declined to sit. Stood lounging at the end of the mantel, with an elbow on it. Rested his cheek against his hand. Slowly, soberly (with the look of a man whose thoughts have mined too deeply to be con-

Lady Can Do

cerned with the surfaces where words are found) took in the scene. The big Chief, standing, dominating the room. Mrs. Cuppy on the sofa. Dr. Obry holding her head while the nurse slipped a cushion under it ('She has come out of it, then,' thought Elsie). The Coroner and Mr. Atkinson and Elsie at the table. Mike and the two policemen who had brought Dane.

Dane's eyes rested a moment on Elsie. In that same deeply grave way. No smiling, no movement of the facial muscles. He simply looked. Her eyes met his, and again that fire blazed. Her face was hot. But she didn't care. And anyway, the others weren't looking at her. She did feel rather terribly exposed. But she couldn't help that. How hot it was! Stifling! And the room swarmed with immense blue policemen! Thousands of 'em! No . . . three. But . . .

The Chief speaking. (Oh, God, the merciless rasp in that voice — how it kept at you!) 'Mr. Dane, Mrs. Cuppy has made up her mind to come through with some evidence that directly concerns you. I've had you brought here so that you can face your accuser and give us your version of what took

Lady Can Do

place, if you have another version. Mrs. Cuppy has been a little upset, but I think she'll hear all we may have to say among us. . . . Now, Mrs. Cuppy, just tell us again . . .'

Said Dr. Obry sternly, 'No!' Then — 'Let Miss Penn read her transcript.'

Elsie went limp. She hadn't foreseen this. She looked up at John Dane. Simply couldn't look anywhere else. The confused thought came that he had somehow found himself. Down there at the jail, perhaps during the grilling he'd had to endure. Something gallant there, just in the way he stood, quietly waiting, as if he'd worked it all out and was willing to let them rave. For that matter, hadn't she, in her earlier turn, found herself? Under the Chief's grilling, too. Found herself, and leaped into desperate action. But she'd got nowhere. And then she'd slumped. Lost her hope. Worse, she'd lost her faith. All vision gone. Blacked out. She could hardly make it come real in her thoughts that there was a Lieutenant Carlock; or that if there was he'd very really get hold of Sin; or that Sin could possibly have the real truth. So speedily had she been

Lady Can Do

caught up again in this web. That was the hell of being a woman. Emotionally unstable. No getting round it. Women were so. Men weren't. Not in that tricky, moody way. They carried on. John Dane, standing quietly there at the end of the mantel, was pretty splendid. Could she buck up to some appearance of steadiness? Doubtful. Yet she must.

They were looking at her. She realized abruptly that the Chief had been speaking and her inner ear hadn't caught it.

He spoke again. 'Read it, please! Mrs. Cuppy's statement as to what took place in the dining-room. Nothing more. None of my questions or her replies. Simply her statement of what took place.'

And then Elsie found herself doing so. With even a measure of self-control. Evidently the human creature, when under real pressure, could endure a lot. A lot. More than you'd dream. Elsie read aloud, very low, but steadily enough, 'It was a little talk I had with Mr. Dane. Just before the crowd went upstairs. In the dining-room. He drew me through the doorway. It was dark in there. He said . . . he said . . . "We've got

Lady Can Do

to do something about your husband. Get rid of him somehow.” ’

‘That’ll do!’ cried the Chief. ‘Just that!’ He turned on Dane. ‘Well, sir, what have you to say to that?’

There was a long silence. Elsie sat as if frozen, looking down at the table.

Finally Dane answered, ‘Nothing.’

‘You confess it?’

‘No. I say nothing.’

‘You admit that such a conversation took place?’

‘We had a few words in the dining-room. Yes.’

‘Just before the party moved upstairs?’

‘Yes.’

‘You discussed the possibility of getting rid of Mr. Cuppy?’

‘I have nothing to say about that.’

‘No fencing, now! Was the subject mentioned?’

‘Why . . . yes.’

‘By you?’

No reply.

‘I’ll give you just one more chance to answer that question. Did you bring up the subject?’

Lady Can Do

Dane didn't move for a full minute. The silence grew heavy, thick, painful, unbearable. Finally he glanced over toward the all but inert blue-and-white figure on the sofa (she was beginning to whimper again, very weakly); shifted his position slightly; shrugged his shoulders. That was all. Not a word.

'So you refuse to answer?'

Dane simply stood there.

'You realize that this amounts to a confession?'

Silence. Then this, from Dane, wearily, 'Why is it that I am not permitted to call up my lawyer?'

'You're going to have time enough for lawyers. Believe me! . . . Now we're going to act out that little scene here. Exactly as it happened. Mrs. Cuppy, stand up!'

Dr. Obry muttered something.

'First, however,' that indomitable Chief again, turning on Elsie — 'I want you to read a few words more. The little thing that John Dane said to you in the garden. We'll see if we can refresh his memory. . . . Come on, read it!'

Elsie was trembling, as her fingers fumbled

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through the leaves of the notebook. 'I don't know that I . . .'

'None of that stuff! You know well enough! Just the confession he made. The important little item you tried so hard to keep from us. Read it!'

Somehow she did. Huskily. '...if I weren't in such a ticklish situation here. The damndest mess — just to-night.' Her lids fluttered up. She couldn't help looking at John Dane. She was glad, in a confused way, that the Chief had accused her of keeping it from them. At least, he'd see . . .

Urquhart was back at Mrs. Cuppy. 'Come on now! Stand up! . . . Dane, you come here! Stand as you stood when you talked with Mrs. Cuppy in the dining-room.'

Dane didn't move. He was looking straight down at Elsie. As if he hadn't heard.

Urquhart whirled on him. Gripped him by the shoulder with a 'Damn you! You do what I say or I'll . . .'

The door opened and Carlock stepped quietly into the room. For the moment Elsie's breath stopped dead. She was pressing weak hands against her breast. Very cool he was, stepping easily, briskly into the

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scene. He spoke calmly enough. They might have been sitting about the table, Chief Urquhart and all.

‘Oh, Dr. Obry, you’d better get Mrs. Cuppy upstairs. We shan’t need her now. Out through the hall, please. I don’t want her going through the den. You’d better have your men take Mr. Dane out, too, Chief. But keep him handy, here in the house. I may want him, a little later.’

Jim Urquhart stood motionless. Here, behind the unobtrusive personality of Lieutenant Carlock, authority loomed. Something was coming from him that would have to be listened to. You felt that. Even (as Elsie put it to herself) this big bully felt it.

Dr. Obry didn’t so much as wait for a word or a nod from him; simply picked Mrs. Cuppy up and left, the nurse hurrying after with his bag and with that blanket caught up under one arm. Before Jim Urquhart so much as turned around — slowly — taken clean aback (you caught that) — they were gone. He was frowning. But he recovered, after a moment more, something of his habitual wooden front and nodded to the policemen who had brought Dane. ‘Take

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him into the dining-room,' he commanded, sharply, 'and shut the doors. Don't let him talk to anybody.'

'That's all right, Chief,' Carlock broke in. 'We needn't worry about him. Just keep handy, Mr. Dane, if you'll be so kind.'

The Chief glowered. But the situation had been swept out of his hands. And he had no answer, no attitude, ready. So, frowning on, he marched — massively — back around the table and resumed his chair.

Carlock rested his hands lightly on the farther edge of the table. 'Gentlemen,' he said, 'before I go on with this, it is only fair to say a word about the extraordinary thing Miss Penn has done.'

Elsie, struggling against an up-surging of relief so stirring that it might easily have mounted into hysterics, felt the hot color rushing again from her toes all the way up through her spent body and into her face. It was only by lowering her eyes and holding tightly the arms of her chair that she was able to keep from laughing, or crying, or *something*.

Carlock went quietly on. 'With a touch of insight . . . perhaps genius would be a better

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word . . . that went straight to the heart of the problem, Miss Penn realized that Ting Pao, the Chinese leader to whom the pearl cap had been consigned, must be made to talk. That, as you know, is not always easy in dealing with these Chinese. Indeed, it is very difficult. The New York police, to-day, were unable to get a word out of him. They were inclined to believe that he really didn't know. But Miss Penn firmly believed that he did know. That he must. I won't go into the details of that story now. We must bear it in mind, however, that Miss Penn had been with us all day. She knew everything that we knew. Perhaps even a little more. Her imagination was caught by the fact that the butler, Sin, didn't return with the other servants. Also by their statement that he was already gone when they came downstairs this morning. Mr. Wong had informed her that Sin had been his butler for years and that he was a faithful servant, incapable of wrongdoing. She leaped intuitively at the conclusion that Sin had either witnessed the murder or had been drawn into it, and that the Chinese hatchet-men who entered this house last night for the purpose of recovering the stolen

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cap had carried him off for their own protection. To keep him out of the way, as a witness. She sensed, as well, that Ting Pao, as a leader in Chinatown, could find the man if any human being could. Her idea was to go straight to Ting Pao and persuade him to talk. She knew that he was desperately eager to come into possession of the cap, so she hit on the scheme of offering to trade the cap for Sin. I gave her her head. More fully than she herself realized. There was a chance that a woman might succeed where men had failed. It was not a matter for discussion or debate. She was either right or wrong. Acting under my instructions, therefore, she proceeded to New York by automobile. And . . . well, she accomplished more than our friends of the New York police department were able to do — she got the truth out of Ting Pao.' He went over to the den door and opened it . . . 'Sin! Come in here!'

Elsie didn't stir. Didn't lift her eyes. She caught it all now. Mr. Carlock (she could have hugged him) was doing a great deal more than protect her from that Jim Urquhart. He was telling her (as well as those men) what her story was. Before she could

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say any of the thousands of possible wrong things. 'Before' (so ran her racing thoughts) 'I can gum the works.' Very good. This was her story.

A curious figure appeared in the doorway. If Mr. Carlock hadn't spoken the name she'd have met with some difficulty in recognizing him. He had no coat; indeed (she saw now) he wore only a shirt and trousers. The shirt was torn. His feet were bare. His left arm was curiously bent, with something projecting through the shreds of the sleeve above the elbow; he held that arm by the wrist, in its bent position, with his right hand. His face was gaunt and dirty; and there was a bloodstained bandage about his head, with unkempt black hair bushing out above it.

'Better sit down, Sin,' observed Carlock; but the Chinese merely compressed his lips and remained standing. Carlock then turned back to the table. 'As you will note, gentlemen, this man has had rather a tough time of it. His left arm is broken. A piece of bone is projecting through the flesh. He appears to have been badly beaten up about the head. I wished to have his arm set before undertaking the ride out here, but he flatly

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refused. His one thought was to return to the house at the earliest moment possible and tell his story. So here he is. . . . Now, Sin, suppose you tell us exactly what happened in the night. Don't be afraid of these gentlemen. Tell it just as you explained it to me. Come up here by the table where we can all hear you.'

20

'Las' night I can't go to sleep. I worry about Mr. Cuppy downstairs in the den. I speak to Miss' — he indicated the staring, flushed Elsie — 'an' she tell me Miss Briggs open windows in den. So I worry some more. We always lock downstairs. But Miss' — again that courteous inclination of the battered head toward Elsie — 'she dunno what to do. I dunno what to do. I think maybe I come downstairs an' wait. Maybe Mr. Cuppy wake up. Then I help him upstairs. But Miss say Miss Briggs have put Mr. Wong in Mr. Cuppy's room. I di'n' know Mr. Wong come here. So I just dunno. Bimeby I hear all people come upstairs. After two o'clock. I think an' think. I get up. I put on shirt an' pants. I come down and lie on

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floor in side hall. Right by door of den. I bring pillow down.'

The men at the table looked at one another.

Sin resumed, 'I lie down there on floor an' try to sleep a li'l.'

'Just why did you do this, Sin?' asked Carlock. 'I want you to make everything clear to these gentlemen.'

'Oh, I worry. I don' like windows open on first floor. An' I worry about pearl cap Mrs. Cuppy have got. I hear China boys talk about that. So I worry. Oh, lots o' things. An' maybe Mr. Cuppy wake up. Then I help him. That all right?'

Carlock nodded. 'Yes. Go ahead.'

'Maybe I sleep some. I dunno. But I hear noise. Window.'

'A window opening?'

'Yes, sir. In den. I hear men moving. Very careful. Very quiet. I think burglars. I get up. I go very still — toward telephone. Before I can do, door opens.'

'The door of the den?'

'Yes, sir. Men come out, very careful. They see me.'

The Chief interrupted crisply, 'Was there a light in the hall?'

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'In front hall, sir. Not in side hall. Always light in front hall, every night. Can't see much. Dim. Very dim. But I see a li'l'. They run at me. There's four men. China men. Beat me. I fight. I know about that. Then I dunno.'

'You mean you became unconscious?' asked Carlock.

'Yes, sir. I think. I dunno quite. I get mix'.'

'Naturally. Go on.'

'When I know again . . .'

'You mean when you came to?'

'Yes, sir. Then I dunno at first what they do. My head hurt. Very mix' up. I am tie' up. My han's. An' something in my mouth. All tie' up.'

'You were gagged?'

'Yes, sir. I am on floor in dark place. I feel coats aroun' my head. Pretty soon I know. In coat closet.'

'That is directly opposite the door of the den, isn't it?'

'Yes, sir. Jus' opposite. We are all there. Very dark. Three — four men in front. One man step on my foot. They look at something. Door open, but not much. Jus'

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li'l'. They look. But bimeby I look too. I look through their legs. One man hold something agains' my face. Revolver. But I look all I can. I see something. A man. All white. Has got no clothes.'

'Naked, you mean?'

'Yes, sir. Has got no clothes. He go in den. He has got something in his han'. I can't see much. But I think it is hatchet. And he has got something else in his han' — piece of cloth.'

'Wrapped round his hand, you mean?'

'Yes, sir. Afterwar', when I hear the men talking I know they hear cellar door open. That is why they are scare' and hide in coat closet. Then the man go in den. Doesn' shut door at all. An' they open door a li'l' wider. I hear Mr. Cuppy snore.'

'The door of the coat closet, you mean?'

'Yes, sir. I see a li'l' more. Not much. But I hear. There is noise — thump — thump! Then more noise. Funny noise. Crack — crack! Then Mr. Cuppy don' snore any more. He is murder', I think. He kill'. That all-white man. I feel terrible. The China men are scare'. Awfully scare' now. They whisper. They think people

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blame them for murder. An' then I know why they come. They come for pearl cap of Tzu Hsi. They don' want to be in trouble for murder Mr. Cuppy.'

'What else did you see and hear, Sin?'

'Di'n' see much. But more noise come. I can't think. Maybe he jus' jump aroun'. Maybe he dance. I dunno. Then bimeby he come out. He laugh to himself. He hasn' got hatchet now. An' he jump aroun' a li'l.'

'In the hall, you mean?'

'Yes, sir. Then he go.'

'Where?'

'I can't see. I think maybe to front hall. Pretty soon it is all quiet. The China men are awfully scare'. They whisper a lot. Mos' of them wanna run away. One man say no, they mus' get the pearl cap. I know him, that man.'

'Who was he?'

'Jim Lee, he was. He work here a li'l' time last year. When I firs' come. He is no good. A gambler. I sen' him away. He don' like me. I know he has say he makes trouble for me some day. Yes, sir, Jim Lee say they mus' fin' the cap of Tzu Hsi, but all the others are too scare'. They say they don' wan' electric

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chair. They think nobody believe what they say if they tell the truth. Anyway, they break in. Jus' awfully scare'. So they make Jim Lee open the side door. They tell him to be very still. But he can't help make some noise. When he shut the door. One man run. Two men grab me. Then I think maybe, if they're so scare' of noise, they won' dare shoot, so I get away. I try to run. I can't make noise because that thing is in my mouth. It hurts. An' my head hurts where they beat me. Well . . . then I dunno. I think maybe they knock me off steps. I dunno what happens. When I know anything next time we are in automobile. I wake up there. It is cold. My arm hurts pretty bad. I feel sick. My arm is broken. They take me to New York an' put me in a cellar. They don' give me anything to eat. The way they talk, I think they don' know what to do about me. They are scare' I will tell somebody they were in the house when Mr. Cuppy is killed. No, they dunno — they are rattle' — so they leave me in cellar. They untie my hands. There are rats. I am very unhappy. It is a long time. Oh, long, long time. Then a man comes — a China man — an' he say —

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"Come with me!" He takes me to back door of Ting Pao's place. You are there. So we come out here. I am glad.'

Not a person had moved during this extraordinary recital. Elsie hadn't made a note. Nobody seemed to even think of that. Not an eye had strayed from the bloodstained face under the bandage. The Coroner broke the hush by spitting, and then muttering a bit of amazed profanity.

'Very good, Sin,' Carlock was speaking. 'Now tell us — when the murderer came out of the den, were you able to see him any better?'

'A li'l', sir. Not much. Not his face much. Oh, jus' a li'l' — jus' once.'

'Could it have been John Dane?'

Sin laughed softly, apologetically. 'Oh, no, sir! Not Mr. Dane. Not so big. I know Mr. Dane.'

'Or Mr. Stromberg?'

'No, sir. Not so big.'

'Better have all the men in, Chief,' said Carlock, in his brisk way. 'Line them up. Perhaps he can identify the man with the hatchet. Sin, you come over here!' He led the way to the portières that hung at the sides

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of the tall front windows. 'Stand in here. Be careful not to let them see you. And don't speak. I will call off the names, one by one. Just try to fix them in your mind as I say them. Then, after they are gone, you will tell us what you can.' With which he produced a pocket knife and cut a small opening in the thick velvet. 'Look through that, Sin.'

Policemen brought them all in, a hushed, puzzled lot. All but Dane and Stromberg. Mr. Delos was sputtering under his breath. The Gargoyle leered, grinning. Mr. Ettlethwaite wore a worried expression. The three others were men that Elsie hadn't, during the evening, been able to identify at all. But two of them, she thought, were the bridge-players. They were ranged in a line with their backs to the fire.

Carlock, from a list he'd had in his pocket, read off the names slowly, one by one, pointing at the proper individual as he did so. 'Mr. Green . . . Mr. Ettlethwaite . . . Mr. Maybach' (This was the Gargoyle. Funny, Elsie'd never thought of him as having a name!) . . . 'Mr. Delos' . . . and so on. Then they filed out and the door was closed. Sin came out from his hiding place.

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'Extraordinary thing!' remarked Mr. Atkinson, in a subdued voice . . . 'that naked business. Explains why your men haven't found any bloodstained clothes, Chief.'

'But he had something wrapped round his hand,' observed the Coroner. 'A cloth. That, if we find it, will be the nearest thing to evidence.'

'Sure.' Atkinson. 'Far as the rest of it was concerned, all he had to do was to pitch the hatchet out the window and then go upstairs and take a bath.'

Carlock had brought Sin back to the fire. 'Well,' said he, 'how about it? Think you could pick one of them?'

'I think, sir' — Sin — 'Mr. Maybach.'

'Mike,' said Carlock, 'bring Maybach in here. Better take Sergeant Stafford with you. He's in the den. I'm not sure of this fiddler. Don't know just what he may pull.' He took Sin by the right arm then, gently, and led him into the den. Elsie could hear him sending for Dr. Obry.

They brought the Gargoyle in, each officer firmly holding an arm. He was still grinning, rolling his eyes from one to another of the group. Carlock returned; went directly to

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him; with deft, swift hands felt everywhere about his body. The Gargoyle tried to shrink back, but the two officers held him. From a hip pocket Carlock drew a rumpled handkerchief. Spread it out. Tossed it on the table. There were unmistakable dark stains on that handkerchief.

‘There’s your evidence, Chief,’ said Carlock. ‘I’ll turn him over to you now.’

21

So his name was Maybach, this leering, grinning, quite mad musician. A slender, insignificant little man, notable only for the glint in his staring eyes and for his quaint ugliness. Elsie stared at him, convinced yet unbelieving. Her thoughts whirled round and round. She’d been right — and wrong. She was exultant, bewildered, unhappy. She wanted to laugh — and cry. Here was drama. Tragedy. Yet it was almost unbearably grotesque. Anger welled in her breast against Hazel Cuppy. The spoiled, pretty woman, caught in the mesh of her own disorganized life, driven by a profoundly ignoble panic, had turned and twisted and lied weakly, shamelessly, frantically, in a

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bitter effort to save herself. For that she would eagerly have sent John Dane to the chair.

Chief Urquhart's voice boomed out, 'Bring him over here!'

Mike and Stafford dragged him toward the table. He was resisting. Shouting epithets in his cackling high voice. Carlock stepped forward to take a hand.

The scene that next took place was unbelievable. It developed so swiftly, so confusedly, that Elsie was never to be able to reconstruct it in her mind in an orderly sequence. The man looked so small beside those police officers, so weak — a pallid, stooping little figure — that apparently he couldn't possibly have done what she, with her own startled eyes, saw him do. He knocked Carlock flat on the rug. You couldn't even figure out how he ever wrenched himself away from those two officers. It was an exhibition, of course, of the desperate energy and the amazing quickness and concentration of purpose that is the peculiar gift of the maniac. Then (and it seemed still the same instant in time) he was bounding down the room toward the den

door. Stafford caught him, only to be whirled against a cabinet of carved jades. His shoulder crashed right through the glass. The exquisite bits of loving workmanship were tumbled into heaps. Mike was after him with a rush. But Mr. Carlock, rebounding (it seemed) from the floor, leaped upon his back. The Chief sprang up from the table and ran at him. But the little man struck, dodged, ran to another corner, screaming profanely, in a frenzy. The Chief cornered him, swinging a massive fist and raising a welt over his cheek bone; but with the speed and force of a terrorized animal the Gargoyle butted the Chief in his one vulnerable spot, the stomach, and drove him back gasping and covering up. The little lacquered table in green and gold fell with a crash. Mr. Carlock tripped him and then dove down upon the sprawling figure. They rolled over and over upon the rug. Mike and Stafford dove too. They beat him nearly to insensibility; beat him until he moaned. There was a click. Somebody had snapped handcuffs on him. They jerked him to his feet. One eye was swollen shut. His lips were puffed and bleeding. As he stood

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there, the purpling Chief, his eyes blazing with savage rage, gave him a terrific kick. Elsie covered her eyes. It must have been at about that moment that she heard Mr. Atkinson say, rather breathlessly to the Coroner (the two of them seemed to be standing almost at her shoulder), 'But where's the motive? How about that?'

To which query the Coroner responded with, 'Yeah! And who stole that Chinese cap? How about that now?' And spat.

Elsie uncovered her eyes. Now her brain began to coöperate (however ineffectually) with her ears. The cackling voice screamed, 'Well, I did it! Sure I did it! It was coming to him! Stupid old ass! I'm a genius! He cut me off! Wouldn't support genius! I decided to give him one last chance. I put it up to him. Yesterday. What else was he good for! Tell me that! Sure I did it! Smashed in his stupid old head! He said he couldn't do another thing for me. So I finished him. Of course I did. And then I danced! Danced all round him! Naked I danced! Don't you wish you'd seen that, eh! God, but I capered! I was happy! I'm happy now! I'm right! It was justice! I'm God! Put that in your pipe

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and smoke it! I smashed in that soft old head! Oh, pineapples!’

They were pulling and pushing him toward the den. Extraordinary how they puffed over it. Pulling and pushing at that little, beaten-up, rumped man.

‘Oh, go ahead! Do what you like with me! What of it! Think you can send me to the chair? Well, you can’t! Do you know why? Because I’m crazy! Crazy as a bed-bug! You can’t execute a crazy man! Look up your law! You can’t do a thing to me! Not one damn thing! Just shut me up in the loony house! You’ll have to feed me! I’ll finish my symphony, that’s what I’ll do! It’ll be grand . . . quiet . . . nobody disturbing me . . . I’ll do my symphony . . . !’

Then this, from the doorway. The hot, high-pitched words and phrases rattled out like bullets from a machine gun — ‘How about Stromberg? How about that bird, eh? What you going to do about him? He stole the Chinese cap! Hid it in his overcoat. I saw him! Kept out of sight in the hall! All naked! God, it’s a scream! He thought nobody knew! Heard the rumpus in the den and thought they’d blame it on burglars! Or

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say, maybe he heard those other men! They ran out. Quite a party! Stromberg thought he'd get free of Hazel Cuppy! The skate has lived off her for years! Oh, I know him! Read him like a book! Thought he could get away with it! And all the time I was the burglar — little naked me! Boy, it's funny! And the room reverberated with his cackling laughter.

The door closed on him.

22

Slowly, wearily, Elsie came down the stairs, in her coat and hat, her suitcase in one hand, her typewriter case in the other. They'd all been told they could leave. It was going on eleven. There was just time to catch the last train into the city. She was wondering, wearily, if somebody would drive her down to the station. Surely there'd be cars.

She saw the actress, Miss Eames, pale, cross-looking, hurrying through the hall, with Mr. Ettlethwaite hovering solicitously.

She put down her burdens a moment to rest her hands and get her breath. Balanced them on a step stooping over. In the front

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hall, near the coat closet, John Dane and Mr. Carlock were talking; quietly, as if nothing had happened. They had their hats and coats on. She wished she'd taken the back stairs. She simply couldn't face John Dane. She *couldn't*. Perhaps he wouldn't look around.

But Mr. Carlock saw her, and said something, with an earnest air. Then he smiled. Actually smiled. She hadn't realized that he could be so good-looking.

She picked up her luggage and went on down, as briskly as she could. But Dane came quickly to meet her. He took her things. She resisted somewhat, without a word (she couldn't speak) — but he got them away from her. He still looked haggard and dull of eye. And his manner was stiffly distant.

'I wonder if you'd mind . . .' he began, awkwardly. 'I know you're a wreck . . . we all are . . . but I thought maybe we could talk just a little. Oh, sanely, I mean. There are a few things I simply must . . .'

She could only stand there.

'I was calling up for a taxi, but Lieutenant Carlock heard me and said nothing doing.

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He insists on sending us to town in a police car.'

'Us?' She did manage to get that out, rather sharply.

'Why . . . yes.' How gloomy he was. 'Do you mind? Very much?'

'Oh . . . I suppose . . .'

So they went out together to the *porte cochère*. Mr. Carlock followed with what appeared to be Dane's bag. One of those big, handsome English Gladstones in very heavy, soft yellow leather. He'd have nice things, of course. The car was waiting, with a policeman in front. A little car, with curtains up. That was good. They'd be right in there with the driver. There couldn't be anything . . . well, personal. Not very well. Mr. Carlock said some nice things, she hardly knew what; and then the car rattled off, past the rock garden, along the shaded driveway. The two bags and the typewriter, piled in there, crowded their knees and feet uncomfortably close.

After a moment of oddly embarrassing silence, Dane remarked, in that same stiff voice and manner, 'I'm taking only this bag with me now. Sin is sending my trunk on by express.'

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She almost sniffed aloud. Who cared what he might do with his trunk! What would he say next? That it was a charming evening?

And then, without another sound from either of them, without a hint or a warning, she was in his arms and her arms were clinging about his shoulders and he was kissing her and she was crying. She was aware of the rather awful thought that she must have simply grabbed at him. What on earth was the matter with them, anyway? Couldn't they be together two minutes without flying up this way? Did he think she was that sort?

She was snuggled down within his arm. In a minute she'd draw away. But the warmth and the strong protectiveness of it was most unnervingly tempting.

Suddenly he chuckled.

Now she did sniff.

'I was just thinking . . . something Lieutenant Carlock said, there in the hall, a minute or so back. He said that if I didn't . . . well, ask you to-night to marry me, he'd be strongly tempted to break my head.'

This was so startling that all Elsie could contrive to say was, 'Oh!'

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He sobered. She certainly didn't mean to snuggle closer, but somehow it happened. 'Will you marry me, Elsie? It does seem to be sort of . . . well, the next thing.'

'I suppose . . .' she heard herself saying (that driver might have been on the planet Mars for all she knew or cared), 'I suppose . . . the way it seems to be, that we'll have to do . . . something . . .'

THE END



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ANABEL AT SEA

By Samuel Merwin

THIS is the story of Anabel's reform. Anabel, however, unlike most people who reform, has been good all her life and she now makes up her mind to be wicked. In pursuit of wickedness, she embarks on a trip around the world with a complete wardrobe of dashing clothes, a bobbed head, and a roving eye. But it is not wickedness for wickedness' sake that Anabel desires, but, shamelessly, a husband.

From New York to Panama, Los Angeles to Tokyo, on to Paris and back to New York, she pursues the elusive gentleman, only to find him unexpectedly where she set out. But in the meantime she has found many would-be husbands and an infinite number of entertaining adventures. The chronicle of the success and failures of the suitors and of Anabel's own extraordinary experiences is full of surprises and unlimited amusement.

